

## wonder moon by orphan\_account

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**Summary:**

What to do when a merman thinks you're *very* pretty and wants you as his mate? Mike doesn't have a conclusive answer to the question, but he sure needs one and quickly.

"Land humans can't go underwater," the merman snaps, tone accusing. "Do you not know how water works?"

*He's getting more eloquent by the minute, Mike thinks with a dull ache blooming in his lungs.*

## wonder moon

The summer heat is brutal, harsh, and cruel. Mike's worked countless summers in his teen years at the beach, but he doesn't think he'll ever get over how fucking hot it gets.

It's like the sun is a spiteful asshole, hell-bent on stretching the days and burning his skin. He wipes the sweat from his brow as he breathes in the refreshing smell of seawater from the ocean visible just beyond the torrid dunes on either side of him. It's the very beginning of July, the start of the tourist season and the end of peaceful days in the comfort of Mike's hometown and slice of coastal paradise . It's the time of year again where the peaceful quiet whisper of the waves gives way to the incessant caw of seagulls as the tourists leave garbage all over the sand and attract the birds like roaches.

The streets are busy, filled with families and teenagers and couples waiting in line to get into a cafe for breakfast, or hoping to snag a perfect spot in the sand to set up camp for the day before everyone else swarms the beaches. It's 11AM and the sweltering humidity has already landed Mike on his ass, so he knows that today is going to be a busy one for the shores.

He's sitting cross-legged on a coarse beach towel, looking out to the calm water. There are fine grains of sand between his toes and the tang of saltwater behind his teeth. And now, a few hours later, he's shivering in the evening breeze, hunger gnawing at his stomach like a tiny creature with sharp claws – but for once his mind is wiped clean. Focusing on the sources of mild discomfort perhaps isn't the healthiest coping mechanism, but it for sure is an effective one.

Mike stands up slowly, feeling an appropriate amount of light-

headedness. Lucas's family is doing their annual barbeque tonight, and Mike's master plan is to hold out for as long as possible until Lucas texts him.

He folds his towel and places it on top of his backpack. He turns to look over his shoulder, but the beach is empty behind him. A couple hundred metres to his left a family of three is packing up to leave as well.

His friends must be at the parking lot loading up the truck. Mike actually is spaced out for a moment. He only remembers the blinding heat and the cool waves under him, but the sun has almost set now, and his hair is dry and tacky with sea salt.

Just as Mike is about to put his shoes back on and start his journey up the small hill where people park their cars, something unusual catches his eye between two sharp rocks that rise from the sea like the teeth of a great white shark. That something is shiny, floating and moving in the shallow water – perhaps some wet plastic washed ashore. Maybe he should go see – after all it could cause some harm to marine animals seeking refuge behind the large rocks. His friends won't miss him, they're most likely having a *grand* time spewing nonsense.

Even though his rational brain is telling him to just drop it and move on, Mike drops his things on the sand and wades back into the water, until it's up to his calf, surprisingly cold against his tired muscles. He's wearing a pair of damp swimming trunks and a cotton t-shirt with a faded logo at the front, and he wishes he had put a hoodie on as well.

It soon becomes clear that the distance is actually much more than

what he estimated from the shore. The water is up to his knees now, but a fresh brand of mania consumes him, keeps him just enough curious to have him not give up.

He stumbles on an underwater rock and momentarily loses sight of the object, as if it's moving fast instead of wafting along the currents. When he sees the flash of colour again, it's all the way to the other side of the bigger rock.

It's moving way too fast.

It's definitely not plastic waste, but something alive. Some kind of marine animal swimming around in the shallow water between the rocks. Is it stuck? Maybe it's injured and needs help.

He sees it then, appearing from behind the rock in a splash of water. A large *fin*.

It's the size of a dolphin's but more fish-like, smooth scales glinting just above the surface of the water – dark sea green and lighter turquoise, almost iridescent in the way they reflect the lingering rays of sun. Before Mike can even think about taking a closer look, there's another loud splash, the animal diving back underwater.

He has managed to startle the creature. For a short moment Mike feels childish disappointment over the fact that he came all this way and sees nothing but a tiny glimpse of what was undoubtedly some kind of cool deep-sea fish pulled from the depths of the sea by a rogue current. The sun hangs low now, and he's quite far away from the shore. The sand is treacherously soft beneath his feet, and there

are sharp rocks all around him. He should hurry back before it gets completely dark.

As he's turning around, Mike hears a small sound, like a round stone hitting the surface of the water with a dull plash.

Someone *laughs*. It's the cheerful laughter of a small child, but the pitch is low and adult.

And then, as he glances back down and opens his mouth to question it, the man flicks his tail.

He's entirely speechless, but the answer is already screaming inside his brain.

*A mermaid.*

Cold terror and disbelief runs down the back of Mike's neck like runny egg yolk. He turns his head, a slow and sticky movement, thinks he's going to faint.

To his left, there's a humanoid figure lying in the shallow water, slender shoulders above surface and a pattern of multichrome scales visible through the crystal clear water. "*Hmmph?*"

The strikingly human sound makes Mike tumble backwards and fall with a stupidly loud splash, cold water rushing to soak his clothes.

The creature has the upper body of a grinning young man, with the face of an angel, mottled with freckles and moles but otherwise perfectly smooth. It has high cheekbones and a narrow jaw, and it's – his eyes are wide and alert, trained on Mike. In the place of legs, he has a long tail which ends in a horizontal fin with translucent webbing between the scales.

*“Hello. I mean - hi, do you–”* Mike stutters, submerged in the water, still not getting up because he doesn't think his legs are going to hold his weight any time soon. The man, or creature, or *unicorn*, tilts his head with a curious expression. A few beads of water run down his light brown hair, which is pretty short at the nape of his neck, slicked back by salt water.

Mike can't do anything but stare unabashedly. There's a strong magnetic pull, urging him to crawl closer on his hands and knees, to see his mesmerising face a little more clearly. Maybe the creature in front of him is a siren, something luring him into the sea to drown him, to take him away into the depths. Another contradictory voice at the back of Mike's mind screams that the creature is so beautiful, too beautiful to be real – with too much intelligence lurking behind his eyes for him to be a mindless monster.

The first voice in his head urges him to run without looking back while the second keeps him glued to the spot. “You don't speak English, do you?”

The creature seems to be listening closely, eyes narrowed in concentration and perhaps confusion. His mouth opens and closes a few times, plump, wet lips that Mike can't tear his eyes away from, but no sound comes out. Only little huffs accompanied by a frown and a rough head shake.

Despite the glaring absence of a common language, the creature doesn't look at all particularly concerned. He swims a little closer

with a lazy flick of his fin that glimmers like wet jewels as it breaks the surface of the water. His acutely human hands are touching the sand below, keeping him from floating away.

The creature is right in front of Mike now, eyes deeper than the ocean itself. He reaches his right hand toward Mike, wet and pale, and for a second he's sure the sea will claim him this way, just twenty or so metres from the shore, drowned by this magnificent being. Mike shuts his eyes in panic, so the gentle brush of wet skin on his cheek comes as a surprise. He yelps, and the hand stills, cupping his jaw. The sea creature lets out a small sound, too, and in the haze of his terror Mike realises that he's mimicking him.

“ *I'm Mike* ,” he says dumbly, staring at the spot where the smooth skin of the creature's waist gradually turns into colourful scales. It's fantastical and yet instantly recognisable. “Do me-mermen have names?”

It's such an idiotic thing to say. This could be an elaborate hidden camera thing—could just be some Hollywood grade SFX makeup. This could and should be anything else other than the reality before his eyes.

The creature, merman or whatever he is, opens his mouth again. Mike somewhat expects another laugh or a huff. “Ma-ike?” he slowly pronounces.

He jolts, this sound is just as human as the laughter from before, and just as eerily accurate.

“Yeah, I’m Mike. Do you have a name?” He dares point at the merman’s chest (*am I really going to use that term in my head now?*) , trying to signal that he’s talking about him.

Is it even a he?

For a fleeting moment, the merman looks as if he’s about to cry, the curve of his lips deep and the corners of his eyes downturned.

Mike panics again—doesn’t want to upset him. “I think you should have a name. Maybe I could give you one.”

The merman splashes his fin again, this time much more cheerfully. He grabs Mike’s chin between two cold fingers and twists his head to see it from different angles. A curious little thing.

“I’m gonna take that as a yes,” he says with a smile to mask how rapidly his heart is hammering in his chest. “How about—”

The merman smiles, grins so wide that it’s a little terrifying how perfectly white his teeth are. “How about Will?” He had a pet goldfish named Sir William when he was five. He loved that fish.

“Wi-ll?” he carefully mimics.

Close enough. “*Yeah, Will .*”



Suddenly, the merman's eyes grow larger. He backs away with a terrified expression and sinks into the water until only his eyes are above the surface. Then he casts one last look in Mike's direction, a gaze filled with meaning which he can't quite interpret. He feels a string of air bubbles brushing his legs as the merman disappears in a puff of whirling sand. His mouth is hanging wide open, jaw lax and unresponsive, and he can't seem to close it.

For the next month or so, Mike goes back to the beach almost every day at sundown. He sits on the beach staring at the familiar formation of rocks until surfers and families are gone and the sky turns to peaches and corals and then bleeds into an inky black.

He stays there, reading a book or catching up on work he hasn't completed at the office until cold seeps into his bones and he no longer sees far enough to spot if the merman decided to return against all odds.

His friends—namely Jane and Max joke about his evening excursions, saying that his new “boyfriend” must be one lucky guy for him to want to spend so much time together. They're relieved and happy, and keep telling Mike that it was about time for him to move on from the disaster that was his relationship with Chris. Little do they know that Mike has merely changed one self-destructive habit to another. And this is definitely ten times crazier than choosing to stay with a guy who cheated on him with two different girls.

He wasn't truly too upset when he found out about the cheating—didn't love Chris enough to sink into real anger or hurt.

Thinking about the very *real* merman Will whom he named after his late pet fish – (that’s something appropriately absurd to distract himself with) his passive hunt for the creature is crack cocaine to his mostly goal-oriented mind.

Mike has decided to let himself do this for one more week. If he doesn’t see a sign of Will, he’ll forget the whole thing and go on with his life. One week is a good, defined amount of day, or so he keeps telling himself.

It’s a warm Friday evening, waves splashing in a comforting rhythm and coaxing Mike into a pleasant state of trance. There’s a flock of seagulls circling over his head, letting out the occasional shriek, but other than that nothing is there to disturb the peace.

It’s due to the meditative nature of his waiting that he almost misses it, the one thing he has been so meticulously waiting for. In a spot where the water gets a little deeper closer to the beach, a head breaks the surface of the water at the brink of sundown. Mike stares at the figure with blank, unseeing eyes for a moment, the hum of the ocean filling his ears.

Then it finally dawns on him. Will is back, smiling, grinning. Waving his hand.

Mike jolts upright and checks that the beach is truly empty. He then takes a few steps closer, gait unsteady, and stops a few metres away from the merman who is now leaning against a smooth, flat rock, the line of his shoulders pale and defined against the dark background.

“Do you–” he starts to say in a voice that doesn’t sound at all like his own. “Do you remember me?”

The merman blinks up and draws in a big gulp of air. “*I do*,” Will says in English.

He's unable to hide his shock. “You can talk.”

“I – *practiced* ,” he says slowly, carefully. His tongue hits his upper teeth as he speaks, giving him a slight lisp.

“How?”

“Listened to–” Will looks to his right as if preparing to reveal a big secret, and then whispers with a wink of confidentiality, “water humans.”

“What are *water humans* ?” Mike asks, again mesmerised by the merman’s presence to the point of wanting to get close enough to be able to count the freckles on his cheeks, to find out if he really is the same creature.

“You are Mi–Mike, and I am Will,” the merman says, completely ignoring Mike’s question.

The fact that the merman is referring to himself by the silly name Mike gave him on a whim makes warm liquid slosh around at the

bottom of his belly. “Yeah. That’s right, I’m Mike. And you’re Will.”

He nods. “I wanted to talk. So I swam,” he gestures toward the open water, “and found floating metal with water humans on top. One water human yelled *a lot* .” Will points at his own ear and winces at the memory.

“You eavesdropped on some fishermen and learned an entire language that way?”

“*Eave?* ” Will frowns in confusion. “You’re Mick–Mike. That’s hard.”

He kneels, knees touching the water, wanting to be eye-level with Will. The sheer intelligence shining behind the merman’s eyes is a force to be reckoned with, but Mike fights not to avert his gaze. “It’s okay. You’re doing great with English,” he reassures.

Will’s frown deepens, but he doesn’t seem angry. His scales are as glorious as Mike remembered. The shifting colours remind him of an oil slick. There are glistening drops of water on his bare collarbones, and on his hair that is nearly dirty blond while soaking wet.

“Why did you come back?” Mike asks quietly as Will shows no signs of initiating further conversation.

“Should I – go? Far away?” Will asks, again gesturing at the vast blackness of the sea behind them.

Mike dashes forward and grabs his wrist on an impulse, not wanting him to leave, wanting to staple his own mouth shut for framing the question like that–

Will snarls at the sudden touch, teeth looking scary and sharp, and he lets go right away, raising his palms in surrender.

“ *Wait*, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to grab you like that. I just don’t want you to go yet.” His clothes are once again soaked through due to his improvised evening swim, and Will looks unconvinced, still hissing and showing his teeth. “I came here almost every night for the past month to see if you would come back. I thought you wouldn’t, because – I mean, I’m just me, and you’re–” the word gets stuck in his throat.

“I know that word,” Will pipes up. “I’m a merman. I’m Will.”

Mike swallows with great difficulty.

“I came to see the pretty land human again,” he explains matter-of-factly.

“ *Me?* You came to see me?”

Will splashes his fin and swims closer until his hands knock against Mike’s knees under the water.

“Pretty,” he repeats and starts laughing. It’s melodic and low, vibrating in his chest.

Mike wants to say something. He can’t know for sure what Will’s comprehension of beauty or attraction is, if it’s just something enough to catch his attention for a short while or if he means it – like *that*.

“Can land humans stay afloat?” Will asks out of the blue, cold fingers gripping Mike’s thigh above his knee, right where his swimming trunks end.

“We can for a little while,” Mike answers without thinking. Will’s eyes turn wicked, and he’s grabbing Mike by the waist, and *oh shit*, is he going to die now?

“Swim,” he declares, and then they’re moving, water bubbling around them, so black and deep and cold.

There’s still a tiny part of him that wonders if Will’s finally going to drown him, but he just laughs when Mike mentions it, sincerely.

He can’t fully comprehend what’s happening or how fast they’re traversing the water, but somehow his head stays just above the surface in Will’s firm grip.

“Will,” he pants, sprays of salt water hitting his eyes. He’s gripping the merman’s slippery but surprisingly strong shoulders for support. “Will, slow down.”

Needless to say, Will doesn’t slow down. He swims and swims and swims, tail hitting the water like a whip, the waves high and scary around them.

After a while, Mike’s strength starts depleting, and his hands slip enough for his head to dunk below the surface for a moment, seawater rushing inside his nose with a sharp burn. Their momentum stops right then, and Will’s hands grab him, guiding him back to the surface where he begins coughing and spluttering in an embarrassing fashion.

“Land humans can’t go underwater,” the merman snaps, tone accusing. “Do you not know how water works?”

*He’s getting more eloquent by the minute*, Mike thinks with a dull ache blooming in his lungs.

“We can stay underwater for a few seconds, but I didn’t have time to prepare for it.”

“Silly.” Will decides. He still has both hands under Mike’s arms, as if he’s scared that the human might sink all the way to the seafloor without constant assistance.

It’s a long tow to their destination, but when they stop, he understands exactly why Will has chosen the spot. They’re in a tide pool along the rocky coast, small and out of view, and inaccessible except to swimmers and fish. And nobody is swimming this far. It’s deep enough that Will can fully submerge, but shallow enough for Mike to stand, and be protected from waves so that water just ripples in and out around the edges, gentle and calm.

He could climb out onto the rocks, but he doesn't; the sheltered pool is already degrees warmer than the ocean, and the day is hot. It's more comfortable to stay wet.

For a long time, they float, not touching each other, but comfortably buoyant within arm's reach. Will is about the same size as him, his tail extending about as far as Mike's feet. He's still as Mike looks him over, finally getting to satisfy his curiosity.

Will's anatomy isn't what Mike had thought it would be from the stories. His gills aren't on his neck - they're along the sides of his chest, following the approximate line of his ribs. He doesn't have external ears, just small openings on the sides of his head, hidden beneath his human-like hair. The upper surfaces of his skin are finely scaled, but the lower are not. The insides of his arms, his chest and stomach, and his palms are all soft and familiar, just like a humans.

Mike takes Will's hand in his own, turning it over to examine it more carefully, and Will just watches him, letting him feel along his fingers and the webbing between them. He places their palms together, similar in size, and looks up to meet Will's gaze. He looks right back and doesn't pull away.

"I can hold my breath for a long time," Will brags after a long bout of silence, studying Mike's face closely. "I can swim all the way to Santa Barbara and back without coming up for air."

"Cool," he hums, starting to shake from the cold. He can see barely anything, just some dim stars twinkling above their heads. How did it get so dark so quickly? "Are we far from the shore?"

Will seems a little disappointed by Mike's lack of enthusiasm. "Close. I swam – sideways."



“Okay but I can only swim for a little while, remember?”

“I remember,” Will confirms with a serious expression.

The way back is almost as quick, but a lot less frantic. Will is swimming and Mike is on his back in his hold like he's the object of an extensive rescue operation. It's easier to breathe this way, but Will's fin douses him in saltwater every few seconds.

Mike feels a gush of unfiltered relief seeing the familiar formation of rocks again.

“Why did you take me out there?” Mike says as soon as his feet touch the sand.

This time Will smiles a little sheepishly, wringing his hands. “You liked it, Mike?” he asks, now a little more confident with the consonants of Mike's name. They're still in deeper water, up to his chest, so he swims a little closer until he can meet Will's eyes comfortably. The merman was trying to impress him, he realises. He was showing off his skills.

Mike smiles and places a hand on his shoulder at the risk of losing some of his fingers. The skin is so soft under his touch, so incredibly human. He wants to touch Will's scales too, feel the stark difference on his fingertips, but a gentle brush like this is already a victory.

“I loved swimming with you.”

Will's eyes light up, and his face glows like the moon. The merman is

so beautiful that Mike finds it even more astonishing than the fact of his sheer existence defying the laws of science and common sense.

Suddenly, there's a constricting feeling in Mike's throat as Will studies his features. "Can I come see you again?" he asks.

"Yes, of course."

"When?"

Will glances at the sky. "The next time the moon is full. Is that something – you can count?"

*Shit*, Mike is going to buy a lunar calendar if that's what it takes. He shakes his head to muffle his own spiralling thoughts. "Yeah, I can do that."

"Good. I will learn more land human things by then."

"You don't have to—"

Will interrupts him by pressing a cold finger to his lips. Despite the low temperature, the touch burns Mike's skin like fire, and he has to fight against the urge to open his mouth.

And then Will turns and is gone in a whirl, and Mike regrets not calling him beautiful.

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Will is an enigma, a complete mystery that consumes Mike's life for the couple of next weeks. He haunts his dreams, his every waking moment, his face blurry yet incredibly detailed in Mike's mind. And Mike doesn't know anything about him, where he comes from, if he has a family or a *partner* . He doesn't even know if he has a name other than the one Mike carelessly gave him.

He wants to know if Will eats raw seafood or maybe plankton like a whale – if he has emotions and wants parallel to human ones, or if his actions and words are pure mimicry, copying the way Mike reacts to things. There are so many questions.

“ *Are you done?* ” he asks.

Mike just silently shakes his head, staring.

The merman rolls his eyes and sighs. He flicks his tail in Mike's direction and splashes him in the face with cold, salty water. Mike splutters. “ *Hey! What the hell?*”

The merman tilts upright, tail sinking out of view.

“What the hell?” he repeats, feeling like his statement encompasses the entire situation.

“I’ve been watching you,” Will states. “You like to fish.”

Mike nods, and then shakes his head, suddenly horrified. “Ye... no! I mean - Oh god, are they your friends?”

The merman looks amused. “ No. What do you think I eat?” He flashes his pointy teeth in a grin.

Mike relaxes slightly, feeling indignant. “I don’t know. It’s not like I’ve thought about it. Okay...” he’s having a hard time following the thread of the conversation. “So... is that not cannibalism?” he asks, just out of curiosity.

Will makes a face at him. “Is it cannibalism when humans eat land animals? It’s the same thing.”

Okay, so mammals are mammals, and fish are... fish? But Mike’s not exactly sure what a mermaid is. More fish than mammal, it turns out.

Sometimes he still wonders if he’s delusional, if he’s in a coma in a hospital bed somewhere, his mind wandering free while he’s hooked up to machines. But life passes normally, day to day average, except when Will is waiting for him below the pier.

He’s curious and reckless, whispering up at him through the wooden slats even when other people are spread out down the pier. But Mike

supposes that's not surprising, considering how Will just decided to talk to a human one day.

"Why me?" Mike asks him one day, his feet dangling over the edge of the pier as they talk, the midsummer sun sinking low on the horizon. Will is floating in slow circles on his back below him, occasionally reaching up to poke at his thighs.

"I liked your face."

Mike's not sure what to say to that. It makes about as much sense as most of the things Will says. So he teases him instead. "Liked?" emphasizing the past tense.

But Will doesn't go for it. "Like," he says simply.

"Oh."

He doesn't know why that statement makes him feel so happy, his chest tight as his heart squeezes within it. He's felt this way more frequently the past few weeks, and he's conflicted about it. Are they... friends?

Their next time at the tide pool, Mike packs a picnic in his waterproof bag. Will's eyes light up when he sees it all.

But he makes a face and dives down into the water, emerging a

minute later with a small, yellow slug in his hands. He holds it up to Mike's face, and the creature smells distinctly like lemons. Will dumps it back into the pool. "It's toxic," he says, and Mike immediately understands his aversion to all things citrus.

He really likes apples, though. His eyes light up as he bites into it and he slips back into the water under the pretense of being too warm, and leans his elbows on the rocks, close enough that his shoulder presses against Mike's. Mike wishes he could feel him directly.

Will must have the same thought. He glances sideways at Mike, looking thoughtful. He reaches out to finger the edge of the wetsuit where it stops at Mike's wrist.

"If you're warm, can't you take this off?" He still doesn't quite understand human temperature regulation, but he's learned enough.

And that settles it. It takes a minute to wriggle out of the suit, and it's not the slickest he's ever looked, but Will doesn't seem to care. He reaches out to touch him as soon as he slips back into the water, running his hands along his legs and looking up at him in wonder. Mike grabs his wrists as his hands slide higher on his thighs.

Will just tilts his head, looking curious and plucking at the hems of his swim trunks.

"What does this protect against?" he asks, and Mike just gapes at him, entirely unsure how to explain human decency to a being that doesn't understand the concept of clothing beyond the thermal regulation function that Mike has already shared with him.

“They’re... not for protection, I guess,” he finally comes up with.  
“They’re for... *decoration* ?”

“So you can take it off,” Will says, but he reminds himself that it’s only weird if he makes it weird, because Will doesn’t exactly have any standards.

Of course Will immediately reaches out to touch him. Mike barely manages to catch his hands again.

And oh god, this is awkward and Will doesn’t even know it.

“What is it?” he asks, and now Mike is naked and being stared at and has to come up with a viable lecture on human anatomy at the same time. It’s a lot for his brain to manage. Will blinks. “You have more than one way of expelling waste?” He gestures vaguely at a spot about a third of the way down his tail.

Mike kind of wants to die. “Yeah, we– uh. Look, I’ll tell you about it later, okay?”

*How about never?*

He prays that he’ll forget about it and that later never happens. But Will is - fortunately or unfortunately, Mike can’t decide - focused on his dick.

“Why is it external?” he wants to know.

Mike tries not to squirm under his stare, but it’s difficult. He’s starting to get hard, and that’s extremely awkward, except for the fact that Will doesn’t understand what it means. So Mike naturally focuses on the science facts instead and wills himself to calm down.

“It’s also used for reproduction,” he explains, and when Will still seems confused: “To, uh... *make kids* ?”

This is really, really the most awkward conversation Mike has ever had in his life, excluding some with his dad, but Will’s expression just clears to something like comprehension. “I get it! Like whales or dolphins,” he says. “Since you’re a mammal.”

Because of course that makes sense to him. Mike sighs. “Yeah, like that.”

“But it doesn’t go back inside?” and Mike has to stop him from touching again.

“No, because... no. It doesn’t.”

Will hums in thought. “Don’t you have to be careful then?”



All he says out loud is, “yeah.” At least it gets Will to stop trying to touch him.

“So how do mermaids... you know. Reproduce?” Mike wills his voice to stay steady. This is just scientific, after all.

He shrugs. “The females will push out eggs when they’re ready. They’ll look for a male to carry and fertilize them. And then the larvae will swim out once they hatch.” He says it all so matter-of-factly, and it’s similar to fish and seahorse mating cycles, so Mike shouldn’t be so surprised, but he is.

“And what happens if a woman doesn’t find a mate? What happens to the... larvae?” It feels weird to call baby mermaids that.

“If she has no mate, she’ll just release the eggs into the water. They won’t hatch. And what do you mean, what happens to the larvae?”

“Do you care for them? How many are there?”

Will shrugs again. “I don’t know, a few hundred? Most don’t survive.”

Mike stares. “And that’s... okay?”

“ *Isn’t it ?*”

His brain hurts. “Okay, so you survived. How... old are you?”

Will spits out a number in the thousands, and it takes Mike a minute to realize that he’s counting in days, tracking the light of the sun. He reaches for his dry bag and pulls out his phone to do the math, careful not to drop it in the water. Will hovers at his shoulder, wanting to see the screen.

“Twenty-six...”

Huh. Will is older than him. By two years.

“Show me that,” Will demands, and for the next long while, he’s distracted learning how to use a smartphone. The phone can take a little water, as long as they don’t dunk it. But the reception isn’t great and Will can’t read more than a little, so the phone is of limited use.

“How do you know everything you know, anyway?” Mike asks him once he tires of the phone.

“I went to school,” he’s now lounging back in the water and twirling in slow circles, basking under the heat of the noon sun.

Mike watches him, wanting to reach out, but forcing himself to hold back and focus on the conversation. “But I thought you didn’t get... raised? Aren’t you on your own?”

“Someone finds you eventually,” Will says, like it’s no big deal. And

to him it probably isn't.

Mike is starting to feel a major divide that even the anatomy discussion hadn't revealed. Will's not human, but it's not limited to his form. His whole world, his whole society, is just *entirely different*. Mike's been thinking of him as a friend... maybe. But family, friends, and partners... it's all unfamiliar to Will, or at least the human concept of them. Can he even love?

Mike reaches out and takes Will's hand as he rotates into reach, stopping his momentum. Will just tilts his head sideways in the water to look at him.

"What are we?" He's not sure he wants to know the answer.

"What do you mean?" Will asks, the sound bubbled since his mouth is half in the water. But he doesn't seem to notice, and Mike can understand him well enough.

"Are we friends? Do mermaids even have friends?"

"Like the people humans go to the beach with?"

"*Sure*. Like that, I guess. People who do things together. For fun. Because they like to." It's a shallow definition, but it's a place to start.

"Then we're friends," he says. "I like being with you."

Those simple statements again. Mike runs his fingers along the scales on the back of Will's hand and takes a deep breath.

"And trust," Mike adds. "Close friends trust each other. They can rely on one another."

"I trust you," Will says, his eyes closed now against the bright sun. "It's why I talked to you in the first place."

"But you didn't even know me."

Will opens his eyes to look at him. "But I'd been watching. I told you."

"You told me you liked my face," Mike reminds him, and Will grins.

"That, too."

---

The next evening Mike is at the beach again, wearing his usual swimming trunks and a beige hoodie. His hair is getting longer and unkempt, the air and the sand beneath him are warm in the remnants of the sun, but the mindless anticipation is making him shiver.

Most of his anxiety stems from the not-so-irrational fear of Will growing bored of him. Last time Will tried to impress him, made the

effort to communicate in his own language – but what does Mike have in return? He highly doubts that Will would appreciate his amateur music taste or his *land human's* athleticism.

And yet he promised to return.

Will holds onto his promise. He arrives chasing the dusk, water glimmering on his scales, bathing in the pastel orange light. And Mike is on his feet in an instant, and then he is running across the sand, getting ready to jump into the water.

But Will doesn't stop at his usual spot. He swims all the way to the shoreline and lets the gentle waves carry him to the sand like a beached whale. He looks up at Mike who sinks into the wet sand beside him.

“You will help me back to the water when I have to leave, yes?”

Mike's stomach somersaults hearing Will's familiar voice, deep and calming like the water. “Yeah. But what if someone sees you?” They haven't discussed the possibility earlier, nor the numerous implications of Will being spotted by others.

“Don't worry, I can sense land humans from far away,” he explains in the same calm and rational tone. He splashes his fin in the water behind him, perhaps to emphasise his words. Mike doesn't pry further. Instead, he scoots back to where the waves can no longer hit his legs.

“How have you been since our – swim?” Mike asks, suddenly feeling overly self-conscious. He wraps his hands around his shins.

Will smiles a little warily. “I hunted for food.”

“What kind of food?” he asks before he can see off his tongue.

Will doesn't seem to take kindly to the string of questions, as his smile gets even more tense. “Octopus. My friends helped.”

“What are your friends called?”

“I don't,” he starts, chewing on his lower lip which is a strikingly human habit, “I don't think I can pronounce merpeople words in air.” The merman presses a hand to his throat, and Mike's eyes involuntarily follow the nearly sensual motion. “We use the vibration of the water to com-communicate,” he says, stumbling over the long word.

Will then explains that his two friends are called something that sounds a lot like “Roooo” and “Stttt” but apparently he can't make the correct sounds on land. When Mike asks about Will's real name, the merman blushes a shade of pink and refuses to answer, saying he prefers Will because it's something Mike chose for him. The smell of seaweed is pungent and comforting tonight, so he tries his best to cling to it instead of crumbling to splinters at Will's words.

“Do you talk to people a lot?” He says it only to fill the heavy silence.

“No. I was looking for clams near the shore when I saw you. I wasn’t supposed to get so close to land humans, but alas – I was hungry and my catch was small,” he adds in a dreamy tone, perhaps thinking about clams. Mike briefly wonders what kind of fisherman could’ve taught him the word ‘alas.’ “I got scolded for it, had to stay away for a while,” Will admits, lowering his eyes in mild embarrassment. “But you weren’t a mean land human like in the stories. You didn’t want to use my insides for... glowing lights.”

It takes Mike’s brain a few seconds to catch up. “Do you mean how like back in the day people used to hunt whales and burn their fat in oil lamps? Besides we have electrical lights now.”

Will raises his brow. “If you don’t want to kill us dead,” he makes a little stabbing motion, which makes Mike jolt, “why does everyone say we should hide? Why do they say both land humans and water humans are bad-evil?”

Mike doesn’t know who ‘they’ exactly are, but Will’s naivete comes as a shock to him. “We’re not all evil, but most people don’t know mermaids even exist. For real. You’re a fairy-tale to us. Like *The Little Mermaid* .”

Will pouts. “I don’t know what that is, but it doesn’t sound good.”

A lump of coal and agitation settles in Mike’s stomach. He’s messing everything up. “But you exist. You’re really here.”

He looks Mike straight in the eye, eyes glittering. He drags himself forward using his hands and curling his tail like a seal on land. It’s

slow but steady, and Mike can only gawk at him in awe.

“I’m here,” he says with a serious expression. “I practiced a lot.”

“You didn’t have to,” Mike gently says, *wants* to say much more than that. Air is barely going into his lungs, and he feels a little faint because of that.

“I learned a new human skill. There was a man human who did it to a woman human. And it had me wondering if you’d like it, too.”

It feels as if someone is tightening a thin wire around Mike’s windpipe, further reducing his air intake. He desperately tries to play it cool. “What, because you think I’m pretty like a girl?”

Will shakes his head and leans closer and then closer still. From this angle it’s clearer that his teeth are sharper than the average human’s. The freckles on his cheeks look like absorbed stardust. There is nothing human about Will, only the untamed sea behind his eyes.

“Why then?” he rasps.

“Because you’re my human now.” It’s simple and definitive. Will isn’t smiling at all.

“Your *human*? Wh–what does that mean?”



Will doesn't answer. He smells like sea-salt and fantasy, and he's so very close, damp arms circling Mike's neck. And then there are lips pressing against his.

Cold and fiery, sloppy, unpracticed.

Will's tongue is pressing against his lips, heavy and surprisingly warm. And Mike relaxes, opens his mouth to taste the salt on Will's lips, and he takes the opportunity to nip Mike's lower lip with his teeth.

Mike lets out a muffled sound against Will's mouth, and his hands wander down, down, down until he feels the rough scales over Will's hip bones. He shudders under his gentle exploration.

*Sensitive*, Mike thinks.

Will is the one to break the kiss. He pulls back, a nervous smile on his lips, licking over them with a dusty pink tongue. "Did I do it correctly?"

Mike's heart swells under his sternum, pulsing against his bones almost painfully. He doesn't know what to say, doesn't know Will's mind or his intent. He knows nothing about mermaids.

"Yeah," he finally mumbles, trying not to collapse on the sand. It's

damp from a few rogue waves, but they're further up the shoreline, only the tip of Will's tail submerged. "It was great."

He beams. His fingers start idly carding the wet sand. He gathers some of the fine grains into his palms.

"Do merpeople ever do that?" Mike asks nervously, still tasting and feeling Will's soft lips on his own.

"No." Will quickly answers, shaking his head, attention still on the sand he's playing with.

"So that was your first k—" Mike swallows his words and continues with a shaky voice. "Then why did you— do you know what it means when people do it?"

Will lets the sand fall through his fingers. His upper body is starting to get dry, and Mike is worried it might be bad for him somehow, but he needs to hear the answer before Will returns to the sea.

"I thought I could—" Will frowns and lets out a noise of frustration. "I don't know how to say it in your language," he huffs with an impatient wave of his hand. He's still lying in the sand, elbows supporting most of his weight. The merman looks a bit uncomfortable on land, out of place just as Mike had felt when Will took him out to the open sea.

"Try to explain it in your terms," he says with a sense of desperation.

He can't grab Will by the arm, can't do anything to keep him here.

Will clicks his tongue. "I'm trying to mate-lure you."

"What's that?" Mike whispers quietly.

"I want to show you my worth. You're very pretty, Mike." His name is now perfect on Will's lips, effortless and familiar.

"Show your *worth*? To me?"

Will looks to the side, thinking hard. "I showed you that I'm the fastest swimmer, so that I can rescue you from any and all sharks that dare try to eat you. I showed you that I'm suitable. Then I made sure you knew my intentions."

*What intentions?*

Unfortunately Will doesn't stop to take a round of questions. "The next thing would be – your counter."

Will is sitting weirdly upright now, as if his tail is somehow curling under him, but that of course is impossible–

"What's a counter?" he asks a little breathlessly.

“It’s when you respond to my mate-lure. You can accept me or challenge my suitability. You can also send me away, and I’ll never come near you again.”

Mike’s head swims. Why is Will suddenly eye-level with him? He looks down, searching for the spot where Will’s skin morphs into turquoise and sea green. He only finds a pale thigh, a bent knee. A set of toes.

“Will!”

The merman looks down too, eyes blown wide. He touches his human shin, and then runs his hand up to his brand new knee.

“*Oh*,” he says.

Just *oh*.

“What the hell happened?” he yells out in panic.

“I think – *I think I was out of the water for too long*?”

The soothing sound of gentle waves rocking against the shore is gone, muffled. Blood rushes to Mike’s ears, pulse loud and erratic on his eardrums.

“You can grow human legs?” he asks after a nondistinctive amount of seconds has passed. His voice sounds hollow and empty, as if someone had pushed an ice cream scoop down his throat and yanked most of his insides out in one go.

“I haven’t had any reason to come to land before, but yeah, that is possible if our bodies aren’t in contact with water for a long period of time.” Will sounds mildly intrigued, like he’s surprised himself that the transformation happened. “Does this influence your decision? Should I have mentioned it sooner?”

Mike stares blankly.

“Are you unwell? I don’t know how to care for a human yet,” he says nervously. “You have all these muscles, but what good does it do when you’re so brittle–“

“I – I don’t understand anything right now,” he croaks. “You said you wanted to lure me? Lure me where, into the water?”

Will huffs at the interruption, sounding a little impatient. “You’re a land human who can’t live underwater.”

The merman shifts his human legs with a wince. The new muscle groups must feel incredibly foreign to him.

“Fuck. I think I need a minute.”

“Are you not convinced of my suitability?” Will says in a questioning tone. The burst of irritation in his eyes melts into something more tender. “Do you need more proof?”

“Uhh, yes?” Mike answers without thinking, desperate to get any sort of reprieve.

Will smiles brightly at that, sharp teeth on display. His expressions are changing so rapidly that Mike isn’t able to keep up. “I can work with that. And I guess now that I’m in human form, I can stay for a while to convince you.”

The offer makes him feel nauseatingly conflicted. He can’t explain Will’s presence with anything, can’t even make him talk in sentences that make sense. It’s a recipe for disaster. But at the same time, the thought of him leaving now when they actually have a chance to talk without fear of Will being seen by someone else, now when Mike has a chance of learning something about Will beyond tiny glimpses that stay in his mind like fragmented fever dreams – the temptation is overwhelming.

“Maybe you could stay for a few days?” Mike starts chewing on the inside of his cheek, almost wishing for Will to politely decline the offer.

He claps his hands like a sea lion and throws his head back. The line of his throat is long and smooth. “I might get scolded by–” he suddenly looks at Mike in the eye, mouth twitching. “Never mind.”

“If there's a problem—“ Mike gestures at the water, looking for the right words.

“No. No problem,” Will quickly says, raising his palm. “Or there is one, but I think you can help with that.”

He stands up with a raised brow, dusting sand off his shorts. “What is it?”

Will points at him. “I don't know how to do that.”

“You mean stand up? Is it because you've never done it before, like talking in a human language?”

Will nods. He's curled up on the sand in a little ball at Mike's feet, legs tucked in front of him and arms around them in a protective way, as if the merman fears the new limbs will just disappear at any moment.

“I don't know how to move these things,” his voice sounds a little strangled.

Mike squeezes his eyes shut, weighing his options. He really doesn't want to carry Will who is out of his element, very much *naked*, and has extraordinarily sharp teeth.

“Maybe try and straighten your legs out first. See if you can move them while sitting down.”

He is praying that Will's ultra fast learning skills aren't limited to new languages. Much to his dismay though, the merman looks slightly flustered for the first time. Accompanied by a pained grunt, Will manages to drop his arms to his sides and drag his right leg along the surface of the sand until it's pointing toward Mike, stiff and trembling.

Mike forces his eyes to focus on Will's collarbones, rising and falling in the steady rhythm of his breathing. “Good, now the other one,” he instructs, conjuring a mostly calm, unaffected voice out of thin air. And Will obeys easily, but he's panting with his tongue hanging out in a puppy-like manner.

Suddenly, the merman snorts. His eyes are downcast and curious.

“What is it?”

Will glances at him and then looks down again, spreading his legs a little. He lets out a disbelieving laugh. “What's this doing here just hanging out?”

Because he's a weak, weak man, Mike glances down where Will's gaze has trailed to. He instantly feels the tips of his ears getting painfully hot. Will is grabbing his privates in a loose grip, still laughing as though he's seeing something terribly amusing. “Not even anything to cover it. Human bodies are even weirder than I thought,” he muses, and then thankfully lets go of himself.



Mike looks up to where the last few rays of sun spill into the water over the horizon, cheeks and neck turned into heating pads. “Yeah, it’s – we wear clothes for that reason.”

“ *Clothes?* You wrap your bodies in many colours. Should I also wear those? Can I get ones that look like my scales?”

Mike starts nodding frantically. “Yeah, you should. I’ll–” he stops talking to take a deep breath and pull his hoodie over his head. He can feel Will’s eyes on him as his shirt rides up his stomach.

“For now, can you wrap this around your waist? Make sure it covers your – *thing*. ”

Will mumbles something further about the irrational oddities of humankind, but he dutifully shimmies the piece of clothing under himself and ties the sleeves over his groin after Mike has demonstrated the correct motions with the drawstring of his shorts. It covers barely anything, but at least any passersby wouldn’t get instantly scandalised, and Mike who has descended to the level of himself at sixteen—that blushing virgin, doesn’t have to avert his wandering gaze every two seconds.

“Can you try standing up now?”

Will blinks slowly, cogs and wheels of consideration turning in his head. He reaches out a hand, and Mike grabs his fingers, warmed by the heated sand. Will is incredibly light in his human form, all tendon

and lean muscle, easy to pull upright by one arm.

But as soon as Will is up on the balls of his feet, his knees buckle, and he slumps against Mike's chest like a sack of flour. He's incredibly warm and pliant in his hold, pressed against a shoulder. His bare skin is separated from Mike's only by a thin layer of cotton, and Mike could swear he feels Will's heart thumping against his own rib cage.

His hands are firm around Will's waist, the only thing keeping the mermaid from collapsing. In this form they're around the same height, but that doesn't stop Will from saying: "I think you should carry me," he mumbles, voice tired, as if simply staying upright is causing him extensive fatigue.

Mike sighs deeply and takes a glance in the direction of the parking lot. He can't see anyone coming their way, which is a huge relief. Him carrying a virtually naked, full-grown man bridal style isn't something he would want to explain to someone coming for a quick evening swim.

Will looks up at him expectantly, limbs loose and heavy, and it takes Mike a few tries to hoist him into his arms, one tucked behind Will's knees and the other under his back. And Will looks oddly content in his arms, and for a brief moment he wonders if he's faking his inability to walk. In every other way Will has been a relatively quick learner, so why not with this?

As he slowly walks up the sandy hill, Mike can make out the individual bumps of Will's spine under his hand – a constant reminder of his nakedness—of the absurdity of the situation.

“What are you thinking about?” Mike can hear that he’s smiling without having to look at him.

“I’m thinking about a lot of things,” he dodges. “I need some time to process.”

Will hums low in his throat. “Have you been lured by a lot of humans, too? I bet you have, because you’re so pretty.”

Mike nearly drops Will, it’s too much having to hear things like that when he’s already slowed down by a lapful of coy merman.

He draws in a deep breath, bracing himself. “We don’t call it that, but yeah I’ve been in a few – relationships.”

“They wouldn’t be–” Will huffs, voice immediately betraying his annoyance. “Were they more suitable than me?”

Mike reaches his old Corolla, the only vehicle in the parking lot. He takes his time before answering, unsure of how to make it understandable for the *fish out of water*.

“I’d rather *not* talk about my failed relationships right now.”

Mike makes the grave mistake of looking down into Will’s eyes that have gone black and stormy. “Who hurt you? I’ll take care of it as soon as I figure out how my legs work.” He forces himself to laugh a

bit, because he can't take Will's words at face value—he can't.

"I'm an adult. I can handle my own shit." It's a mild lie, but that's beside the point.

"But when you become my mate, your concerns will be my concerns," he says matter-of-factly.

Mike snorts. "You sound sure of yourself."

"You didn't send me away, did you?"

"That's because I'm too curious and too weak to let you slip through my fingers for a third time," Mike sighs, and reaches for the car keys in his pocket. It's a little difficult with Will still in his arms. Will doesn't reply, he seems to be lost in his thoughts.

Mike manages to get the passenger door open. He places Will in the seat and reaches over to fasten his seatbelt. Will doesn't protest, but he eyes up the black fabric going across his freckled chest, not looking very impressed.

"Have you ever seen a car before?"

Will shakes his head, still mute.

“It goes pretty fast, faster than you can swim. That belt makes sure you stay strapped in and don’t hurt yourself if something happens. You can’t take it off while the car is moving. Got it?”

“Are you trying to impress me with this piece of metal?” but his eyes stay soft and round.

Mike has to physically restrain himself from grabbing Will’s face between his hands so grabs his wrist instead, staring at the faint redness creeping up on his cheeks and chest, chasing his wandering gaze that washes over Mike every few seconds. What he would give to know Will’s mind.

“I have a towel in the back, hold on a second,” Mike mumbles, standing back. He retrieves the old frayed thing and dumps it unceremoniously over Will’s bare legs. “Keep this on. It’ll look like we’re just two friends coming back from the beach. It’s gonna be okay,” he says that part more to convince himself that everything won’t go horribly wrong as soon as Will opens his mouth in public.

He walks around the car, shuddering at the mere thought of Will meeting other people, and then goes to start the car. The radio is on by default, something generic and bass-heavy blasts from the speakers, and Will seems delighted if not a little scared by the sound. He lowers the volume a bit and puts the stick on reverse.

They’re quiet for a while. Mike lets him get used to the noise of the motor and the rasp of gravel under the tires.

When he deems that Will has calmed down enough, he asks what has

been on his mind from their second meeting. “Why do you want me as your mate?”

Will doesn’t answer immediately. He’s gripping the edge of his seat, staring at the road ahead, nodding his head to the music a little absentmindedly.

“You have to talk to me. I’m about to bring you to my mothers’ house, my house, so you owe me some kind of explanation.”

It’s enough to snap Will out of his trance. “Does this piece of rope really keep us safe?” he then hooks a few fingers under the seat belt and gives it a tug.

“You don’t have to be scared. It’s normal to not trust new things, but you’re safe. I promise.”

Will sucks air through his teeth, it almost sounds like a whistle. The road remains empty, they only pass a handful of detached houses with big fences in yards. “I guess,” he mutters, looking out the window. His side profile is as magical as the rest of his face. Even with legs – who was going to buy that such a creature would be a normal person?

Will touches the side window with the tip of his finger, testing, exploring. He then proceeds to mush his entire cheek against the glass.

*“What are you doing?”*

“I wish I knew how to produce this substance,” his tone is wistful. “I would build you a nest at the bottom of the sea. That way I could come visit you every single day.”

Mike laughs nervously. “That sounds a lot like keeping me a prisoner.”

“You would come to me willingly,” he objects right away. He seems to have regained his self-confidence. “I’ll bring you as much proof as you need. I’ll make sure you know I’m much more suitable than those humans who put a dent in you and didn’t even bother to smoothen it out.”

Mike’s throat constricts almost painfully. “Did you play dumb the first time I met you?”

“I’m *not dumb*,” Will quickly says, fingers now exploring the dashboard and a pair of sunglasses on top. Mike takes a sharp right, and Will jolts in fear. They’ve reached the main road, so there are more cars passing by, more streetlights. Mike changes to fifth gear.

“I know you’re not. You’re just – you. That’s what confuses me.”

Will looks at him from the corner of his eye. “I want you to be my mate.”

He smacks his palm against the top of the steering wheel, insides tightening on anxious coils that are about to snap. “But why? Why do you want me? We barely know each other.”

Will is breathing heavily through his nose, looking in the other direction.

“Will, I’m—”

“I don’t understand,” he interrupts, frustration bleeding into his voice. “I don’t know what you want from me. You are my ideal mate. I’m waiting for your answer.”

*Ideal mate.*

Do merpeople have feelings, emotions? Will has expressions, reactions. He calls Mike pretty, his *mate*, he touches him with gentle hands. But he doesn’t have any reason for wanting that.

“I’m sorry if I made you uncomfortable.”

“This rumbling metal object makes me uncomfortable. Are we at your nest soon?”

---

Mike parks his car on the driveway behind his mother’s Kia. It



becomes eerily quiet as soon as the engine stops and the air stills inside the car. Will isn't upset anymore, just a little spaced out, and Mike can't really fault him.

"Listen. I'm gonna sneak inside and get some clothes for you. My mom—" he searches Will's face for understanding and thankfully finds it, "—my mom and sister are probably home, but she doesn't mind me bringing friends to stay over every once and a while. She's really chill." It's true. She has been happier ever since the divorce with Ted. Though for the exact reason, Mike would rather get into at a later date.

Will nods, clutching the edge of the towel.

"But if she starts asking you any questions, let me take the lead, okay? I'll pretend we met through one of my electives since they're the only friends she hasn't met before."

"Would she oppose us being mated?"

Mike presses his eyes shut, tight, clenching his teeth because this just can't end well. There's no way. "Not a peep," he threatens. "You don't mention *that* word, or, any word to her. Just smile and nod and say 'thank you' if mom gives you something to eat. Can you do that? Otherwise this won't work."

Will agrees to the conditions, if a little reluctantly. Mike rushes to the front door and upstairs, making sure to skip the one step that notoriously creaks. For once luck is on his side, as his mother and sister—he's never getting over the fact she's now a fifteen year old

fully formed person, and also acts irritatingly exactly like Nancy who won't ever get off his back—who seem to be cooped up in the kitchen. He rummages his closet for a clean T-shirt and pair of joggers that can be cinched tight at the waist to compensate for their difference in size. His room is a mess, but since Will has no reference for human accommodations, it shouldn't be too humiliating.

Back at the car Will is still calm and mostly collected. He has gotten rid of the towel, only Mike's hoodie around his waist. Mike opens the car door with an uncoiled screech, and Will gives him a slightly mischievous look. "Is it usual for adult humans to still be in their mother's nest?"

Mike groans and proceeds to throw the bundle of clothes at Will to not have to look at his grinning face a second longer.

"I'll *be sure to explain* my failures in life later. Let's see if you still want me as your mate after hearing what I have to say."

Will laughs and tries to pull the shirt over his head, but unfortunately he's trying to fit his head through the armhole. Which means Mike has to help a grown man dress himself for the very first time, in the middle of his yard.

After Will is mostly clothed, Mike pulls him up and tries to get him to stand on his own feet.

"Just lean on me, okay? You can stay in my bed tonight."

Will glances at him curiously, probably not knowing what a bed is. Mike tries very hard not to think about Will in his bed. He's probably beet red even when they step through the door, with Will panting and dragging his feet but still managing to stay mostly upright with the majority of his weight supported by Mike. He makes sure to slam the door shut loudly to announce their entrance. He doesn't want to get caught sneaking around when he has an ethereal-looking guy glued to his right side.

Will has no shoes, so Mike just has to hope his mother doesn't notice that the surprise visitor didn't leave a pair in the rack next to the door.

"Mom, you in the kitchen?" he calls out. "I brought a friend, he needs a place to crash at for tonight."

His mother comes to the hallway holding a wooden mixing spoon. Something flashes behind her eyes – confusion or perhaps slight distrust. But it lasts only for a second before she reigns her face into a smile. "I haven't met you before, have I?"

"No. I'm Will." He glances at Mike, gulping air, and Mike wants to cry out of relief that no further words escape his lips. He puts together a quick and ambiguous backstory for Will and waits for his mother to go back to the kitchen.

He's looking rather pale, hands on the staircase railing for extra support, and Mike has no other option than to piggyback him up the stairs. He relaxes against Mike's back, breathing heavily into the hairs at his nape. The warm bursts of air make his entire body feel electrified.

Only after the bedroom door is closed behind them, and Will is laying on Mike's crumpled bed covers, the situation starts to fully sink in.

"Are you okay?" he asks, voice breaking in half like a dry twig.

"It hurts - trying to walk. But I'm fine now."

"Maybe it's because your muscles aren't used to that kind of movement yet."

"That must be it," Will agrees. "Can you come and lie here with me?" He's fiddling with his shirt in a way that makes it ride up his lean stomach, revealing how hopelessly loose Mike's trousers are on him. Even though Mike has seen him completely naked, this moderate state of undress is somehow so much worse – Will in his bed, stifling whimpers of pain, shifting his achy legs to get more comfortable. It's surreal. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I can sleep on the floor, just fine, don't worry about it. Do you want me to get you something to eat?"

Will scrunches up his nose. "I doubt land human food would suit my taste. And my mate isn't going to rest below me, that won't do at all."

Mike shifts his weight from one leg to another as Will rolls to his side to leave a human-sized space on the full sized bed. "Normally I would

find a spot where the sea is calm. Then sleep on the surface. That's not possible for us, but I want to feel like you're not floating away. Please, Mike." Will reaches his hands toward him. His eyes are getting dim with exhaustion. Mike wonders if it's dangerously taxing for mermaids to shift to human form, just like small lizards can die after dropping their tail.

*I should keep watch* , he says to himself.

He truly is a weak, weak man.

"I – I guess I can do that," he says, deflating. "But I need to go get some food and do some human work stuff before bed, since it's still early. Can you take a nap or something? And I'll be back in a few."

"You won't leave the nest?" Will questions, voice suddenly much sharper. He gestures at his weak legs splayed on the bed. "I can't protect you in this state."

Mike huffs, amused. "I won't, but there's nothing to worry about. It's a safe neighbourhood."

Will doesn't look convinced in the slightest. "There are predators in every food chain. I know because I'm one myself." It's disconcerting how serious he is. He smiles in a slightly sardonic way, eyes falling shut. His breathing is growing more even. "I'm not talking about sharks, Mike," he mutters before drifting off to sleep.

Because Mike is truly a weak bastard, he stays at the bedside, looking at how Will's face relaxes, loses its mysterious facade, and becomes just like any other young man.

---

Mike wakes up to a surprising warmth, something touching his waist, spread over his back like an electric blanket. His neck feels unusually stiff and his legs are bent against his body.

The memories of last night come back to him in bits – Will waking up from his nap after he returned with food, making a huge fuss when he was fed little pieces of chicken and vegetables, because the Brussel sprouts tasted like “rotten kelp.” Will ripping off his shirt because the cotton felt too scratchy on his skin, Mike trying to wrestle him back into it, failing, trying to go to sleep on the floor and failing at that as well.

Mike remembers how Will had whined and kicked his legs (that magically started working just fine) until he caved and climbed into the bed. He also remembers having the strange urge to kiss Will again, just to see what would happen, but instead he drew the blankets over his head and waited until Will's breathing grew heavy.

And now this, Mike as the little spoon, sweat dripping down his neck because apparently Will is an actual furnace outside of cold water.

According to the digital alarm clock on his bedside table, the one with the crappy built in radio that hasn't worked since 2005, it's currently eight thirty six in the morning, bleary sunlight shifting through the blinds. They must've gone to bed really early.

Will still has the distinct scent of sea on his skin, salt and fresh air with a hint of the tanginess of seaweed. His breathing is heavy and moist against his neck, and Mike is sporting a completely unrelated morning wood.

“You awake?” he whispers into the stillness of the room. Will shifts his position and yawns, and it’s perhaps the most endearing sound Mike has ever heard. He purposely stays facing away from Will, because he’s wearing a pair of thin sweats that conceal absolutely nothing.

“Yup.” Will confirms, and his voice – it’s rough and deep and Mike’s insides go on a wild roller coaster.

“How did you sleep?”

Will is quiet for a moment, smacking his lips in the air that must be oddly dry and stale to him. “I slept – it was– I didn’t have to wake up and check for–”

“ *Danger?* ” Mike completes.

He hums and sits up on the bed, placing a warm hand on Mike’s shoulder.

Mike twists only his upper body to meet Will’s eyes, that glimmer in the golden morning sun. The blankets are stuck under their overheated bodies, so he doesn’t have time to cover himself. Will’s

shirt, way too big for him, has slid off one shoulder to reveal a hint of collarbone. He hovers over him and then looks down, one eyebrow raised ever so slightly as though he's assessing a questionable piece of art. Sweaty and half hard isn't exactly a flattering look on Mike, but Will staring down at his boner is doing little to make it go away.

Will is so fucking ethereal even with droplets of sweat running down his temples, bangs matted against his forehead. "Do humans ever practice breeding for fun?" he asks in a conversational tone.

For a moment Mike only manages to blink. The morning sun dances on the crown of his head as Will tilts his chin up to stare at him in a smug kind of curiosity.

"Wh-what?" Mike somehow blurts out when Will's dismissive smirk grows unbearable.

Will nods at his pants, and something beyond simple intrigue flashes behind his dark irises. "Do you breed even when you aren't attempting to conceive?"

He swallows, hard, and the bubbling froth of his saliva feels like potent acid sliding down his throat, burning away his vocal cords and the last dregs of his dignity. He ends up coughing and gasping for air, which makes Will wrap his hands around Mike's torso and tap his shoulder blades in a remotely soothing way.

"What the hell?" he eventually manages with a wet splutter of excess spit and desperation. The tips of his ears are on fire, a vortex of doom and unwanted arousal looming over his head. All Mike wants is to



roll off the bed and hide his head in the pile of dirty clothes next to it, but Will's arms are still around him like a prison he doesn't really want to escape.

"Why are you so red and squirmy?" But he doesn't let go of Mike. One of his legs is brushing against Mike's thigh, skinny but firm with muscles. "Do you or do you not? I have to know so I can see to your needs."

See to his *needs*? Is Will really implying that he wants to—

He abandons the thought for the sake of his sanity and resigns himself to an inevitable fate. "Yeah, we call it something else though," he mutters under his breath, defeated.

"Maybe we're not so different after all."

It's insane, absolutely ludicrous, but Mike feels a sharp twist of something akin to jealousy below his rapidly thrumming heart. He opens his mouth before he manages to shut off the primal part of his brain. "So, do you do that *a lot* for – *fun*? "

Will purses his lips, eyes suddenly unreadable. "I shouldn't talk about that with my mate. I have a feeling it might upset you."

Whenever Will says *that* word in his casual, nearly nonchalant tone, it feels like getting doused with boiling water and then being dunked into a bathtub full of ice cubes immediately after.

“I’m not upset,” he says way too loudly. “And I never agreed to be your mate.”

Will makes a face. “I would learn everything required to make breeding more enjoyable for you.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Mike shouts, “would you stop talking about breeding?”

It’s only after that he remembers that this early in the morning, both his sister and mother might still be home. And Will must recognise the look of horror on Mike’s face, because he falls silent. He stumbles off the bed in a frenzy, achy and throbbing, mind still flooding with pictures of Will over him, under him, sprawled across his lap, asking him to teach him how Mike likes to be—

“We should go eat breakfast. I’ll take a quick shower. You probably – can’t do that.”

“What’s a shower?” he asks, eyes wide.

“It’s a place where water comes from the ceiling. You can get clean and – cool down.”

Will touches his shins subconsciously, perhaps thinking about how his tail would make a surprise appearance if he were to try.

Mike picks up an old, dog-eared comic from the shelf over his bed and pushes it in Will's hands. "Wait here. You can look at this if you get bored. There's pictures of ducks inside."

"I know what ducks are," Will says happily. "But how do they get thin enough to fit inside?"

Leaving Will to unravel the mystery, Mike deems it safe enough to go and drench himself in one hundred litres of ice cold water.

After his shower, in clean clothes and with a relatively clear mind, he leads the merman out of the safe confines of his room. Will walks much better today. He even goes down the stairs on his own, albeit only after some gentle coaxing from Mike who stands below him and beckons Will to take one more step, like he's a cat stuck in a tree. His legs seem to work fine, but the height of the stairs seems to intimidate him.

"Are you sure you didn't act like you couldn't walk just to get me to carry you around?" Mike asks when they reach the kitchen, and Will is only moderately out of breath. He firmly shakes his head at the accusation, and that's the extent of their discussion as Mike's mother appears in the doorway wearing one of her casual day to day dresses. Today it's lavender colored.

"You boys are up early," she greets and gives them a smile.

Will opens his mouth to say something, but Mike forces him quiet with one look. Thank God for his natural leadership skills that seem to work even on another species.

Karen scrolls on her phone while making some coffee, ignoring her son and his supposed friend completely. It leaves Mike anxious even after she leaves for work.

Will categorically refuses breakfast until Mike swears that there aren't any vegetables in store for him. He offers a can of tuna from the pantry, and Will chomps the flaky fish down happily enough, straight out of the can, using his hands and teeth. It's another stroke of luck that Holly, who leaves next, isn't a breakfast person and doesn't witness the bizarre sight.

A few hours later he's showing Will the TV, which is even more wondrous to him than an old comic book. They're watching a nature documentary about the deserts in Australia, and Will is pointing at everything, absorbing new vocabulary like a sponge.

*"Why is that rock red?"*

*"What is that spiky plant called?"*

*"Why is that land human dressed like that?"*

Mike's phone buzzes demandingly, and he fishes the device out of his pocket as the string of questions keep rolling off of Will's tongue.

## 2 New Messages

**[10:23] BAMF Hopper:** I love your mom

She asked me if “a cute brunette guy called Will” is her son’s new boyfriend

**[10:24] BAMF Hopper:** I was extra nice and told her I don’t know anything

Mike rubs his eyes with the flat of his hand until he sees white spots. There are two urgent questions on his mind – why do his mother and his best friend have each other’s phone numbers, and even more importantly – when did Jane manage to change her name on his phone?

**[10:25] Me:** you’ll make me pay for your \*very\* generous favour, I assume?

**[10:25] BAMF Hopper:** you know me so well babe

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“I need to leave today. My friends and my–” he drops the sentence half-way. “I mean they’ll get worried. I’ve been away longer than expected.”

Mike is still hung up on Will’s words that were left hanging in the air, so he can’t come up with a rational answer in time. They don’t stop walking in long, hurried strides before they’re safely at his car.

“What do you mean? Your friends are waiting for you, and who else?” he asks, slight tension audible in his voice despite his best efforts.

Will stays silent, huffing through his nose and leaning against the car door.

“Do you have a partner already? A mate?” He hates how his irritation grows and blooms as he speaks.

Will’s face softens a little. “I have no partner, no other mate. I would never betray you. I have no reason to.”

He realises in that moment that Will truly means it, means every single word. Like Will is a layer of transparent ice, and his words bounce off it, loud and clear. Mike feels light-headed.

“We have a hierarchy among merpeople. I somewhat violated that by coming here and staying with you.” Will explains, voice getting a bit sheepish. He looks lanky and almost malnourished in Mike’s oversized clothes, but the look behind his eyes is still bright.

Mike wants to drown in those eyes.

“When do you have to go back?”

“When the sun sets, I think. My friends will come and get me if I don’t come back in time.”

He presses his tongue against the inside of his cheek. Suddenly the few measly hours they have left seem of paramount importance. “Will you stay with me until then?”

“Of course,” Will smiles. “I have yet to successfully lure you, so I’ll keep trying until you accept me.”

It stings a bit, somewhere in the soft V between his ribs. Will doesn’t seem to notice, his smile remains bright and warm. “Show me the things land humans do for fun,” he requests, looking at him with an expectant sparkle in his eyes.

Mike quickly rules out all social activities from his imaginary list of ‘land human fun.’

“We could uhh – go to the aquarium to see fish? Or maybe not, you see plenty of those for free–” his voice trails off, and Will lifts a brow in the same way Mike would. He must have picked up the expression from him.

“Maybe we could go to the movies or something? You remember those moving pictures on the TV?”

Will nods at the suggestion, looking to his left. He must be reminiscing the nature documentary from earlier.

“There are ones that are made up, like stories with a plot.”

He doesn't follow. “Why would they show something fake?”

“People love when stuff is fake. Sometimes they prefer it to things that are real,” Mike says, feeling like an old and important philosopher for that fleeting moment.

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Going to the movies proves itself a great choice for concealing Will's numerous oddities, but it's not enough to spare Mike from a two hour-long torture session.

They have sat barely past the second round of commercials when Will touches him. It seems almost accidental at first, a brush of elbows that sends waves of static down to Mike's fingertips and all the way to the edge of his jaw. He tries his best to ignore the sudden contact, unwilling to read anything into it.

But then it happens again. And again.

There's a tub of popcorn balanced on top of Will's thighs. The smell of butter and salt intrigued him in the lobby, but he isn't eating his snack.

“You don't like it?” Mike whispers when the screen goes black, flashing a remainder to put phones on silent.



Will leans in and pushes his elbow even more firmly against him. “It doesn’t taste like anything,” he whispers.

“It’s okay. I can eat the popcorn.”

Will smiles at that, sneaking a hand into the tub. Before Mike has time to specify that he could simply take the carton from him, his fingers are hovering in front of Mike’s face, holding a single piece of popcorn like an invitation. Or bait.

When Mike doesn’t immediately react, he presses the coarse edge of the popcorn against his lower lip, applying a bit of pressure. And his mouth slips open in defeat, and Will places the treat just behind his teeth. He’s so quick that Mike can’t even feel his nails scraping the exposed inside of his lip. He lets the popcorn dissolve a bit before biting into the crunchy surface.

Will’s hand is in the tub again, rustling. The movie has started, Mike but can’t even remember what it’s supposed to be. He stares at the screen with unseeing eyes, observing from the corner of his eyes how the hand draws nearer again.

He accepts the second popcorn without complaint, going for a bite, when Will’s finger inches a tiny bit deeper, pressing down on the tip of his tongue. The mermaid has a look of mild horror on his face, so Mike tries to flash him a reassuring smile. Although it’s difficult to pull off when blood is thumping against the side of his skull like a hammer. His mouth feels empty and coated in salt.

Will recovers quickly. He places the same hand at the juncture of Mike's neck and shoulder. He shudders when Will's fingers draw lazy patterns over his throat.

"Do you want something?" Mike whispers, his voice barely audible. Right now he's ready and willing to give just about anything.

"I want a lot," Will answers evenly. There's a loud scene playing on the screen, but Mike can only hear Will next to him.

Will's breath is back on his neck, and Mike just knows he's not going to survive the next words. "I want to make sure no one even looks at you ever again," his voice low and a little menacing. He's no longer touching him, but Mike can still feel his hands on his skin, claiming what's already his. It's slightly pathetic, but he whimpers at the back of his throat. "I want to collect seashells and make you the prettiest necklace that shows you're mine."

Mike really can't, in any world, ever imagine himself rocking a seashell necklace, but for Will he would probably run around with a cardboard box over his head.

"Yeah?" It's a miracle that there aren't other people on the same row with them.

They've lost their minds in the dusty darkness of the theatre, coaxed into mania by the soft velvet of the seats, the hushed voices, the notion that they're rapidly running out of time. That's what this is.

“You’re so pretty.” Will touches him again, fingers finding the shell of Mike’s ear and brushing over it gently. “I would be happy just looking at you all day.”

Mike draws in a shaky breath. “You’re prettier, Will, I swear you have no idea.”

There’s a loud explosion on the screen, and Will yelps.

He looks so fucking human again that it’s just plain unfair.

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The sun is setting, and Will tells him to hurry, dragging Mike by his sweaty hand. His feet stumble over some shrubs and Will powers through like it’s nothing. He seems adamant to make it back to the beach in time.

So Mike indulges him, floors the pedal on his rattling Corolla and speeds through the quiet neighbourhood. During the drive Will once again is a little suspicious of the sounds of the car.

“Will I meet your friends tonight?” he asks while parking the car between two trees. They haven’t talked much on the way to the beach, so his own speaking voice sounds loud to his ears. Will tells him he isn’t sure about that. That’s the extent of their discussion.

The weather is nice and warm, but the beach is empty as usual due to its remote location. They silently agree to delay the inevitable for a few extra minutes, Will is reluctant to go and Mike even more

unwilling to let him leave. Somehow Mike's hand finds Will's, and they stare into the orange glow of the sunset in a newfound companionship. Will's hand is warm and in his, the perfect size to fully envelope in his palm.

Mike could almost get used to this.

At the break of sunset, the sky purplish pink with deeper blue at the edges, three mermaids emerge from the water in perfect unison. Mike doesn't even flinch at the unfamiliar sight, not even when it signifies that he and Will have stalled for too long.

One of the mermen's fins is splashing happily on the surface of the water, reddish brown in colour. A short burst of laughter escapes his lips as soon as he sees Will sitting on the sand.

The second merman is a female, no doubt about it, and has heavier features and kind eyes. Her tail is flicking in slower motions, blue and purple glimmering on her scales. She waves Will hello and then acknowledges Mike with a curt nod. His head feels heavy and detached as he bends his neck to return the gesture.

The third one is the leader of the group, there's no question about it. He's all hard lines and strong jaw, eyes dark with intent and maybe purposeful intimidation. He swims the closest to the shore with a confident flick of his fin and proceeds to greet Mike in fluent English. It takes his brain a few seconds to register what's happening, but he manages to stand up and bow clumsily in the merman's general direction, introducing himself in his own, slightly less refined english. Will doesn't look at all surprised when Mike sneaks a glance at him.

“You can call me Jon, as that name was given to me,” the merman says. His scales are by far the darkest, almost black with lighter blue accents running down his sides. He directs his sharp gaze at Will next, whose shoulders are slumped in a clear display of submission, eyes equally downcast.

“Jon” hisses with his teeth bared and then grunts something low in his throat. Mike remembers that it’s difficult for merpeople to speak their language on land.

Will hangs his head even lower in reaction. He takes a few wobbly steps closer to the water and sits down on a rock close to the shoreline. His toes are only centimetres from where the water hits the sand, but he stays dry and in human form. Mike follows close behind, just to be safe, while Jon observes from the water.

“I need to talk to you, human mate,” he says after Will has settled down. The merman’s chestnut hair is swept back to fully reveal his features and the well-developed muscles in his neck and shoulders.

“I’m here, so talk. How did you even know I spoke English?” He thinks he sounds almost calm and collected.

Jon tilts his head and gives him a mildly critical once-over that leaves Mike feeling oddly self-conscious. “A lucky guess. And it is unfortunately the only human language I have mastered so far, so it had to do.”

“How did you learn it?” he asks out of curiosity, thinking back to Will’s rocky start.

“It’s a long and uneventful story. We were up north, chasing the migrating bluefin tuna. I met a man called Daniel. I lured him for weeks, and then asked him to be my mate.”

Jon’s unemotional tone of voice doesn’t bode well at all.

“What happened?”

“Nothing dramatic,” he says with a shrug. The other mermaids have swum closer to Will and are now communicating with some kind of hand signals.

Mike isn’t sure if he wants to hear the rest of the story, but the choice is taken from him as Jon keeps talking. “Daniel had a peculiar hobby which required him to move across a space in a predetermined way. It always made him sweaty and breathless in a matter of minutes, but he smiled when he was done.”

Jon pauses his story to click his tongue at the other mermaids who are now laughing together, pointing at Will’s human legs in awe. The single command renders all three silent.

“Right around the same time I started my mate-lure, he got an offer. His task was to stand behind a group of people with strange-coloured hair and loud voices and then copy what they did. I can’t say I understand it, but it made him happy. In order to be with me he would’ve had to give up that dream and spend his life near the shore somewhere, always waiting. He eventually countered my lure with

rejection, and we parted ways.”

Jon takes Mike’s pained silence as a permission to go on.

“Now that you know of my past, I’m sure you’ll understand well enough why I want to discuss your courting relationship.”

“We don’t necessarily have a relationship,” he objects weakly.

“You took him to land and spent the night with him, and you dare claim to my face that there is no relationship?” Jon’s eyes grow darker, and there’s a tinge of anger lacing his words.

Mike stumbles over his words while rushing to defend himself, and it must only make him look worse. “I s–swear I’ve never done or said anything.”

Some of the seething fury in Jon’s eyes dissipates. “Most humans would take advantage when they get the unwavering admiration of a creature such as Nen here.”

It takes Mike a few moments to realise that he’s referring to Will.

“That’s his real name? He wouldn’t tell me.”

Will perks up a little, but he doesn't lift his eyes from the ground. He must realise that they're talking about him.

Jon snickers. "It's similar to that, although you'd have to be underwater to hear how our language truly sounds. Nen hates his name for some reason. He says it's old-fashioned. I think he was teased about it as a calf."

Mike glances at Will again. He looks so small, so defeated. There's a flutter of anxiety at the base of his chest, an irregular pressure.

"You aren't going to punish him for coming to see me, right?"

"*Punish him*?" Jon laughs, "why would I punish him for being young and foolish? If and when he has to bear the pain of losing you, that will be punishment enough."

"Why would he have to lose—" Mike starts to ask, but the words are left hanging in the air, rancid with the smell of decaying fish. Just as Will has explained time and time again, he has to counter the offer. And if he declines, they'll lose each other.

If he accepts, though – what would even happen then? Would he have to move to some remote island and sit around all day waiting for Will to come to see him once every blue moon? Either way, their future seems glum and uncertain.

"Nen is his own merperson. I cannot and will not interfere with his



courting, even if I'm not pleased by it. But he's only a baby in my eyes, him and these two, so I feel a sense of responsibility." Jon points at the two other mermaids who are floating quietly in the shallow water, eyes wide and curious.

"Baby—" Mike repeats dumbly, a trickle of dread running down his temple. "How old are you, then?" He's internally kicking himself for not asking that question earlier.

Jon grins with his mouth wide open. The merman's teeth are a little curved, like a row of tiny fish hooks. Unlike Will, whose teeth are perfectly straight.

"Merpeople reach maturity after thirty eight migration seasons. Nen has most already, but I have looked after him for over half of my own fifty seasons. That means he will always be my little calf."

*Fifty?* Jon looks nothing like his age. He has a youthful masculinity to him which suggests that merpeople age differently compared to humans. It's yet another nail in the overflowing coffin of 'why Mike isn't good enough for someone like Will'.

"Why me, why court a human instead of another mermaid?"

Jon studies Mike's face for a while. "You ask that, and yet human beings are all too good at falling in love with the wrong kind of person. Isn't that what your kind calls hypocrisy?"

## *Falling in love.*

Jon says the words with perfect ease, as if it's not a foreign concept to him. Did the dancer teach him the meaning of that word, or was it something he could grasp over time?

Once again, Mike's eyes trail back to Will. The merman's eyes are glittering in the remnants of the sunset, moist at the corners like after a good cry. Mike wants to comfort him but doesn't know how.

"We must go, staying in one spot near a large city is putting us in jeopardy." Jon ends his words with another hiss that has Will's chin snapping up like it has a string attached to it. He starts shedding his clothes in hurried motions, fingers pulling on the double knot at the waistband of his shorts. He fails to untangle it, and Mike has to step in to help. He places his own hands on top of Will's, and the merman melts into the touch, a small sigh escaping his lips.

Mike pulls his shorts down gently, hands touching nothing but the fabric in an attempt to appear gentlemanly and respectful to their audience. Will is soon bared to the cool evening air. The birthmarks on his chest move in tandem with his inhales and exhales.

"I'm going to keep him away for a while. You haven't outright rejected him it seems, but you need to make up your mind before I allow him onto the shore again," Jon says bluntly. His eyes gleam with poorly veiled hostility as his gaze washes over Mike.

Jon hisses again, and Will instantly lets go of his arm. The loss of contact stings. Mike forces himself to meet Will's eyes, deep and unsure like the sea just before a storm breaks out.

"I don't know why your customs are the way they are. I don't know what I'm supposed to choose. Don't go yet." he pleads.

“I have to. But I’ll return in a few moons, I promise.”

Mike chokes on the sea salt lingering in the air. Or maybe it’s his own unshed tears that he can taste at the back of his mouth. Will turns to leave, and Mike – Mike doesn’t think, only acts. He grabs Will’s arm and yanks him back. Will hisses on instinct, and Jon splashes his fin against the water in an impatient manner. The two other mermaids gasp in shock and possibly amusement.

Mike pulls Will against his chest, not caring about his nakedness one bit. He cups his cheek, feels the restless ocean under his warm skin, calling him home.

*Fuck it* , he thinks.

Just fuck it.

He presses a forceful kiss on Will’s lips, for the first time in charge of something between them. Will becomes rigid for a moment but then leans into the kiss, opens his mouth for Mike to explore. His tongue is soft where it rests against his teeth, and his mouth tastes like mangoes. There’s not a lot of spit involved, just a warm brush of lips against each other. His hand comes to rest at Will’s nape, trying to pull him closer even though it’s physically impossible. The kiss goes on, bending time and space with its sheer unexpectedness.

Mike leans back to see Will’s eyes closed and peaceful, the apples of his cheeks a shade of peachy pink. Mike did that to him.

“See you,” he whispers.

Mike nods shakily, perhaps too taken aback to form words. And then he slips out of Mike’s hold and unceremoniously sets his foot into the water. It takes no more than a few seconds for the transformation to

start, for Will's legs to start morphing together before his eyes, changing colours.

Will is in his element in the water, eyes falling shut in joy as he rolls in the water. His friends are at his sides in an instant, seeing if he's really back to normal.

Jon says something, a command, and Mike knows it is time.

They share one last gaze, and then Will flicks his tail up into the air.

Mike closes his eyes and counts to ten while listening to the empty hum of the ocean.

When he reopens his eyes, the water is still.

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It would be nice to say that Mike's life goes back to normal, that Will's time on land was just a fleeting fever dream. Technically it does – and he keeps getting ridiculed and teased by Dustin because he's an easy target and because Dustin's life is stagnant and generally uninteresting.

The constant self-doubt and anxiety keeps him up late at night, hours rolling by at an agonising pace that is too slow and too fast at the same time. He analyses and reanalyzes everything Will has ever done and said, from the first time Will touched his face and mispronounced his name to their shared kisses, to the terse and cryptic conversations they had about life and a possible future together.

He thinks of the times when they disagreed and failed to communicate, times when Will genuinely made him smile and made him feel like he was worth a damn.

Those thoughts often spiral fast into unpleasant territories. He'll surely find a merman or a *mermaid* he likes more than Mike. Maybe Mike'll get fired from his job too, just for good fucking measure.

After one round of his mildly self-destructive roulette Mike will kick his blankets to the floor, drenched in sweat and emotional overload. He will then try to fade Will's face from his mind, push back the memory of his tail glinting in the turquoise water. It never works, though. There are too many memories, too many possibilities that flash by like a mountain stream. Mike often wonders what Will is doing, if the merman thinks about him from time to time.

If Will has other partners to see to his needs, if Mike has become completely useless to him.

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Mike comes back to full awareness when the exhaust of a motorcycle outside the bar makes a loud bang as the engine starts. Max is sitting opposite to him, staring at him as if he has lost his mind. Eyes never leaving him, she swipes a few condensation droplets off her pint of beer.

Mike mirrors the motion but on his chin. The bar is getting louder, full of college students and general loiterers. He and Max fall into both categories.

"I need your opinion on something."

"Does it have something to do with your little boyfriend by any chance?"

“Why would you instantly think of that?” he frowns.

“Because you keep acting like your ass is on fire, and Will has been gone for weeks,” she says as if the two things are obviously connected.

“What does that even mean? Why would my ass be on fire?”

“You can't concentrate on anything. Either you sink into your thoughts for hours like right now, or you bounce around like a rabbit on LSD.”

“That metaphor doesn't even work,” Mike complains, lifting his glass to take a sip. “And why do you automatically assume that my entire life revolves around him?”

“Am I wrong?” She quirks a brow.

Mike gives Max a death stare, but his non-existent cover is blown. “I feel like I don't understand him,” he huffs. “He might not understand me either, I'm not really sure.”

Max studies his face for a brief, frozen moment. The only proof of the undisrupted passage of time is her long pointer finger that keeps idly tracing the rim of her glass.

“Is it that because you want a serious relationship, and he just wants

to have some fun?” his friend eventually asks.

Mike lets stale air escape his lungs, laced with cheap beer and cigarette smoke and his own shortcomings. He feels like laughing but doesn't act on the mindless urge. “No – it's the opposite.”

“Oh.”

“Will is very – he sees everything in black and white. He needs me to fully commit to the relationship even though we've only known each other for a few months. Otherwise it's not gonna work for him, *like at all* .”

“And you don't want commitment? What happened to the hopeless romantic Mike Wheeler I once knew and loved?” Max asks, sounding unconvinced. “Don't say that jerk managed to turn you into a cynic.”

Mike cringes at the casual mention of his ex, who was dubbed ‘*that jerk*’ by the entire party shortly after their messy yet utterly underwhelming breakup. The eloquent nickname stuck.

“It's not that, either. He just needs – a different level of commitment, I guess?”

“Does he want you as his sex slave or something?” She asks loudly enough to turn a few heads at nearby tables.

Before Mike can find it in himself to react in any humanlike way, the

words drill a narrow hole to his skull and slither in, spreading their linguistic tendrils into areas in his brain he didn't even know he possessed. Will fitting a thick leather collar around his neck isn't something he wants to visualise in too much detail, but there's not much to be done about it and–

“ *What?* ” he finally blurts out, mouth agape in lingering disbelief.

“What?” Max echoes, face flat, like what she said–in public– is perfectly normal.

Mike shakes his head like a dog after a rain shower. His overly flustered reaction is in ridiculous contrast to the serene expression on Max's face. “I haven't even– wh–why would I just start talking about kinky stuff in the middle of a bar? What the hell Max?”

Her eyes are glinting all too brightly. “I'm working with what little information you're throwing at me. It's hardly my fault that I have such a *healthy* imagination.”

There's nothing wrong with Mike's imagination either, *thank you very much*. The air inside the bar feels incredibly hot and humid now. There must be a wild blush blooming on his cheeks, so he lets out a hollow laugh as if it could stop some of the horrible pressure inside him, churning and accumulating like steam inside an old locomotive.

“It's just complicated. I don't even know how to describe it.”



“Let’s make it uncomplicated then,” she suggests. “Do you want to see him again?”

“Of course I do,” it’s easy to admit. The taste of beer still lingers on his tongue, pleasantly bitter.

“You like him?”

It’s a slightly harder question, even though there is only one possible answer, one Mike is too much a coward to give outright. He pretends to study the bubbles in his beer, rising to the surface in a string of oxygen.

“He’s so awkward,” Mike muses. “He says exactly what he thinks, nothing less, nothing more.”

“I didn’t ask for a comprehensive character study, Wheeler.” Max says, frowning.

“I– I do like him though,” he concludes. He draws in a shaky breath. He can feel Max’s’ dead-on stare.

“So. You like him, but there are some sort of *external obstacles* ?”

Mike shrugs. “I guess so. We just lead really different lives, I don’t know how our relationship could work in the long run.”

“As far as excuses go, that sounds like a load of shit.”

He snorts, nursing his beer glass.

Some kind of commotion catches his eye while a silence stretches between Max and him. The flat screen television on the wall is showing news, pictures and text flashing by quickly. Mike is tipsy enough to not be able to grasp what the story is about, but people seem restless. The bartender is almost running for the remote, and soon the sound comes on, blasting at full volume. A strange, anticipatory murmur fills the room.

*“Good evening. This is ABC News. A commercial oil tanker transporting over two million barrels of crude oil has capsized approximately ten kilometres from Mare Beach. We have a marine biologist on the line to tell us about how we're preventing the oil from spreading onto our shores. Lewis?”*

Suddenly he can't fucking breathe, the air in his windpipe dissolving before it reaches his lungs. He sees white and then black and then white again.

A man with shaggy hair and an aura of academia about him appears on the screen.

*“The situation is proving to be very difficult. The tanker has keeled over, and the rescue personnel on the scene are running into some large waves. At this early stage it's already clear that the spill will have a significant impact on marine life –“*

Mike has risen to his feet without noticing. There's a strange buzzing sound in his ears, like a horde of flies crawling inside him.

"I have to go," he mutters.

Max's eyes are two large saucers. "What, right now? Where?"

Will could be in danger.

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Technically speaking Mike is drinking and driving. It might only be two beers, but at the back of his mind Mike knows he's not exactly in the mental state to be driving, alcohol running through his system or not.

But he drives, 80 per hour on a narrow, winding road with gravel shooting to the side bank from under the tires. He drives while seeing flashes of Will in his mind, injured and in pain, coughing up oil from his lungs, his scales full of burn marks. Max tries to call him, five times – Mike counts but doesn't stop to call back. He has nothing to offer his friend who was left at the bar, confused and probably a little pissed off.

Mike arrives at their beach in record time, heart hammering against his larynx in a nauseating way. The steely grey clouds hang low on the sky, revealing no stars. The sea is black and restless, strong gusts of wind stirring the water into seething foam.

He wonders if the oil will spread this far, if it will destroy the beach, their beach.

After that thought he sinks onto the cool sand. His legs simply cave in and fold in half like flimsy pieces of cardboard. He sits, sits, waits, and feels like he's still suffering from acute arrhythmia. He feels useless and helpless, fingers carding the sand like he's seen Will doing, trying to see any signs of a sheet of oil slithering closer along the surface of the water, but there's nothing but endless waves mercilessly crashing against the sand and the rocks.

Despite the fact that Will could be hunting anywhere in the Pacific, could be half-way to Hawaii for all he knows, the feeling of dread doesn't dissipate as the minutes stretch to half an hour and then more. What if Will stayed close by, fulfilling his promise to Jon but never straying too far? The thought makes him mad with worry and irrational self-blame that he's unable to switch off, as it's like a buggy piece of software spewing error messages every two seconds.

Mike's phone is pinging notifications from news sites and Twitter and various group chats, a couple of worried texts from Jane, but he doesn't look at any of them, doesn't want to know how bad it is. He can't do anything but chew his fingernails into bloody stumps in anxiety.

He can wait and wait and wait for the slim chance that Will would come to him, for help or perhaps just tell him that he's okay. He needs to know that Will is okay to be able to go on with his life. It might be a highly selfish sentiment, but Mike doesn't have it in himself to care.

Right then, hanging off the edge of a figurative cliff by the tips of his

fingers, Mike sees a ratty mop of hair break the surface of the water. It's Will, out of breath, coughing and spluttering salt water out of his nose like a human after a long dive, and Mike instantly knows that something is horribly wrong, and the initial wave of relief is replaced with ice-cold horror.

Mike yells his name so loudly it bounces off the rocks. It makes Will lock his eyes with him, reddened, desperate eyes, and time seems to stop for a moment. And Mike runs through stagnant time and soft sand, almost tripping over his feet in haste. Will is fighting the waves and failing. His tail lies limply underwater, out of sight, hands splashing the water.

"Mike," Will says, as soon as he sees him wading into the water, fully clothed but not giving a damn about it. The merman's sharp teeth look horrifyingly white against the background of muddy tones and black water.

"Shh baby it's okay. I got you."

"My – my friends went out to the sea to hunt, but I wanted to s-stay behind just in case, and then—" he breaks out in small sobs. He eventually reaches Will who is floating between a few rocks, trying to grasp onto the slippery edges, still gasping for air. It's pretty dark, but Mike can see that there's a greasy sheen all over his body and hair.

"I know, I'm so sorry." He takes a hold of Will by the waist, where his scales meet the smooth skin of his abdomen, and starts unceremoniously dragging him toward the beach. Will tries to help by flicking his tail, but the effort is weak and powerless. He seems to be on the brink of exhaustion. The waves are pulling them in all directions, making their progress much slower than Mike would

prefer.

“How did you know to come?” His voice is getting odd, raspy and scarily quiet. There are tears on his cheeks now, running down the oily film already coating his skin.

“There was an accident. A ship fell over. I was worried you might still be in the area.”

Will lets out a breathy laugh. “Somehow I knew I would find my mate here.”

Mike feels a twist of uncalled pride below his heart. He wants to say it back, but it's not the right time, not when Will's entire body is cold and limp in his hold and the water is trying actively to murder them both.

“Do you know how to get this off? No matter how fast I swim, it won't come off.”

Mike frowns. The beach is really close, so he waits for a big wave and uses the momentum to push Will onto the sand. The merman rolls over like an otter and tries to wiggle his way out of the waterline. For the first time he seems more than eager to get out of the water.

“I think you need to wash it off? I'll try my best, but I should ring up a marine veterinarian just to be sure.”

“What’s a vet–“ Will’s face contorts mid-sentence and he starts dry heaving. Mike manages to kneel beside him and help his body into a sitting position before he vomits. It’s thin and watery, almost nothing but bile.

He experiences yet another round of agonising whiplash. “You didn’t swallow the oil, did you?”

Will stops to wipe his mouth with the back of his hand. He looks nauseous, and his eyes are red and bloodshot. “I don’t think so,” he says, but he doesn’t sound at all sure of himself.

“Okay,” he says, trying not to panic. “I’ll – take you home. We’ll figure it out together.”

“Take me to your nest,” Will confirms and then proceeds to throw up again.

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“The article I found online says that birds affected by an oil spill should be washed with dish soap,” he says, swiping sweat off his forehead with his free hand. His shirt clings to his skin where he held Will close to his chest, and the combined smell of putrid oil and sea salt is overpowering in the small space.

Will hasn’t thrown up again after turning into human form in the car and puking the rest of his insides all over his freshly formed legs, which still somehow managed to be covered in oil.

“I – I’m not a bird,” Will objects, teeth clattering so loudly the sound reflects off the tile walls. According to the article the coat of oil is messing with his body’s ability to manage a regular temperature, making him slowly freeze to death.

The merman is lying down in the empty bathtub with his human legs folded in half and curled up into a defensive ball. He’s shivering from head to toe even though it’s warm and humid in the bathroom. His eyes are round with fright, and every attempt to touch him since placing him in the tub he now seems to consider as his safe space has resulted in panicked snarls.

“There isn’t exactly a lot of info on mammals who have fish scales.” It comes out a bit too harshly, with ragged breath and a sharp edge. Mike regrets his tone. “Do you still feel sick?”

Will forcibly shakes his head. He probably has nothing left in his stomach to throw up at this point.

“At least, that’s something.” Mike dangles the washcloth and bottle of soap in the air for Will to see. “Let’s just give it a shot, okay?”

He looks up with owlsh eyes, blinking in a lazy pattern. His lower lip trembles in sync with the rest of his body.

Mike sees the precious seconds trickling down the drain but he can’t afford to cause Will more anxiety and spiral him further into his bestial headspace, not when he looks like a wounded animal ready to



bolt. Will came to him and willingly placed his life in Mike's grossly under-qualified hands, sought him out when he was at his most vulnerable, so Mike has to act accordingly.

“Doesn’t warm water sound nice right now?” he tries, voice soft by sheer force of will.

Will perks up a bit at Mike’s words, and his back produces a squeaky sound rubbing against the edge of the tub. But then his eyes trail back to the dish soap in Mike’s hand, getting narrower in apparent hesitation. “Why is it so green? I don’t trust it.”

Mike knows he’s on the brink of victory, he only needs to play his last hand of cards right. “It can break down oil. You’ll feel better once all that greasy stuff is gone, I promise,” he ends his explanation by gesturing vaguely at Will’s slippery form as he fidgets at the bottom of the tub.

Will licks his chapped lips, but he doesn’t seem to have enough saliva in his mouth to even wet them. Mike tried to make him drink some water on the way home, but Will declined and said that merpeople don’t need to drink water like humans, and that he doesn’t intend to start now.

Stubborn little shit.

The seconds tick by, and Mike has just enough time to ponder what the fuck he’s going to tell his mother and younger sibling who’ll have to walk into this mess. He also needs to burn the interior of his car, or at least purchase a whole new passenger seat.

He tries once more, gesturing with the clean rag.

The merman rests his head against the edge of the tub and draws in a long breath that wheezes in his throat. "Fine."

He lets out a sigh of relief. Mike opens the tap and lets warm water flow into the tub. It only takes a few seconds for Will's transformation to start, and even though Mike has seen it before, the process still manages to startle him. Judging by the pained expression on Will's face, he's getting even more exhausted by the constant shifts.

Mike swallows the jagged lump of sympathy which then settles in his chest, grazing his sternum to splinters from the inside. He squeezes a generous amount of dish soap into the water, and it foams and bubbles and smells like the times when he stood on a stepping stool and helped his mom clean those fancy wooden kitchen utensils you aren't supposed to put in the dishwasher. Will pokes the bubbles with his fingers, but there is no real excitement over the phenomenon, only tired curiosity and maybe some fear.

"It's not green anymore. It became white," Will comments, and Mike nods and says he noticed the same thing. It seems to satisfy him for now, as he settles down in the water.

Mike puts on a pair of yellow rubber gloves, a little too tight on him, and cradles Will's head between his hands. His hair is shiny with oil.

“Close your eyes.”

Will obeys as he promised to do, and his shoulders fall. His tail is so long that it comes out of the water at the other end of the tub. Oily water is dripping onto the floor from the tip of his fin.

Mike squeezes the bottle again and lets the washing liquid drip down Will's hair and neck in green streaks. He shudders at the sensation but doesn't open his eyes. His hand blindly finds Mike's wrist and squeezes with slippery fingers. Mike keeps his movements slow and precise so that Will's hold doesn't slip. He takes the washcloth and wets it with warm water and more soap.

His teeth snap blindly at the air when Mike starts meticulously going over his body with the washcloth, but he manages not to bite him. His muscles are tense and wiry, trembling under Mike's ministrations and from the effort to stay completely still.

It's a never-ending cycle after that, washing his skin and hair and draining the tub, then quickly filling it again with clean water before Will turns into human form and makes himself even more tired.

The foul smell of oil still permeates the air. It's clinging to Will's pores and the cracks between his scales even after three rounds of washing. His skin is pink like a pig's from the vigorous scrubbing.

He's resting his cheek against the edge of the tub. His eyes are half lidded and drowsy, and he's breathing through his mouth, because some oil went up his nose earlier.

Mike stumbles to his feet. His knees are on fire from sitting on the cold tiles for so long. "I'll open the window to let some air in."

"Okay," Will mumbles but makes no effort to move his hand.

"You need to let go of me," Mike gently reminds with a little tap on Will's wrist.

He opens his eyes a bit more. It seems to take a great deal of effort, but he manages. The merman looks at his own hand still attached to Mike's, and then lets it flop back underwater with wince.

"I'll rinse you one more time and take you to my bed. How does that sound?"

Will nods and mumbles something affirmative. He hasn't been able to form full sentences after the first wash.

It takes quite a bit of effort, but Mike carries him to his bed while he's still in merman form. His tail is long and heavy, and it grazes the floorboards at every step, spreading water everywhere. He's just about finished with tucking Will's drying tail under a mountain of blankets, when the front door opens downstairs.

"Michael, are you home?" his mother calls out.

“Yeah, upstairs!” Mike pats the edge of the blanket, trying to fluff it to hide the shape of Will’s fin and give him the illusion of human legs.

His little sister, Holly, chimes in. “What’s that weird smell?”

He glances at Will, who’s already falling asleep, uninterested in the conversation. His fingers are clutching the edge of the topmost blanket, as though he’s pretending the cloth to be Mike’s hand. It hurts to walk away, but he gets up with a long sigh, making sure for the last time that not one scale of Will’s is visible. He goes downstairs and fabricates an elaborate story about how Will is teaching him how to paint with oil paint, and that he was so tired afterwards that he passed out in his bed.

His mom pulls him aside after a few minutes and congratulates Mike on having a boyfriend. He isn’t sure if they buy the oil painting story, but at least they let Will sleep in peace.

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“Morning.”

Mike jolts awake, falling from the cotton cloud of sleep where his thoughts were pleasantly scattered, and sees Will looming over his upper body, kneeling on the bed, completely nude as Mike wasn’t exactly able to force his tail into human clothing. Will’s cheeks glow red but in a healthier way, and his eyes have their usual warm glint to them.

There’s an odd pressure in the passage between Mike’s nose and throat as he lets his eyes trail over Will’s healed form. It’s an urge to say something sappy, to kiss Will but instead, he cups Will’s warm

cheek in his palm. The merman's lashes flutter, and he leans into the touch.

"You look better," he remarks in a quiet voice.

"I heal quickly," Will looks down at Mike with a degree of longing that burns through Mike's body like wildfire. "Thank you for helping me last night. I don't know if I would've survived on my own."

Will's words are like a stab to the chest. The pressure rises to impossible heights and radiates up to Mike's eyes. He feels like he's about to burst open with unsaid words.

"Will," he says, enjoying how the name rolls off his tongue, smooth and familiar.

"Yeah?"

"You're my mate, aren't you?" His voice breaks and crackles, but Will's smile indicates that he's heard everything perfectly.

"Does this mean you finally accept my mate-lure?"

Mike huffs out a small laugh and lets his hand wander up to Will's ribs. "It does. You lured me so well."

Will pouts a bit. "I didn't even bring you the courting gifts I prepared. I was supposed to come back with fresh fish and I had planned for my friends to vouch for me, and—"

Mike stops Will by pulling him down for a kiss. It leaves them both needlessly breathless.

“Is there some kind of ritual we need to perform?” he asks Will, sitting up on the bed to meet his eyes more comfortably.

The merman shakes his head along with a tight grin as if the question itself is a little silly.

“What do we do then?”

“We're mates now. You just countered my lure,” Will says evenly, shrugging his shoulders.

“Just – like that?”

The merman looks at him, the corners of his lips curling. “What more do you want?”

Mike blinks, thinking he might be going red in the face. “I – I don't know. I wasn't sure what to expect... Wait, we're actually mates now? There's no fancy soulmate magic that lets us know each other's emotions or something? Or some mate marks etched to our skin? Why am I kind of disappointed?”

Will smiles at that. “You already know how I feel, silly. And I promise to bring you gifts, make you feel like the spoiled mate you deserve to be. I can even bite you if you want like. My teeth are very sharp.”

It's nine thirty in the morning according to the bedside clock. The house is empty. Will is naked, and there's only a thin blanket separating them. Mike's thoughts are derailing and badly. He has the urge to press a hand against his neck, where he already feels a phantom imprint of Will's teeth, claiming him.

“In what ways exactly are you gonna spoil me?” Mike asks before he manages to get a hold of himself.

“Do you want a demonstration?”

He throws his head back and laughs, partly to hide the effect Will’s stupid flirting has on him. “Where did you even – where did you learn something that cheesy? Who taught you to speak English?”

“You did,” Will simply replies, and then clambers into Mike’s lap with little finesse, a hurdle of limbs and mischievous smiles. He cradles Mike’s face between two warm palms and starts kissing him, like a human would, with easy confidence. He smells like the sea again, like sunshine and wind and waves, and Mike is rapidly developing some weird saltwater kink.

Desperation lurches inside him in a vertical motion. They’re very different, these touches. There is no teasing preamble, no sticky hesitation. It’s Will taking what he wants, what he already has.

Mike puts his hands on his waist, and he shivers violently. His skin is blazing hot and perfectly smooth.

“Wait,” he murmurs against Will’s half-open mouth.

Will makes a discontent noise in his throat and moves his mouth down to suck a mark just above Mike’s collarbone. It has Mike’s eyes rolling back in his head, but he holds Will at a distance, fingers curling around his ribs.

“Wait – ahh Ff—are we really gonna have sex right now?”

Will stops in his tracks and breathes against Mike’s neck in wet huffs. His tongue keeps grazing the juncture of his neck and shoulder, and it’s so fucking hard to stay still.



“I want to breed with you. Am I not allowed to do that for my pretty mate?” Will asks, voice misty with lust, but real concern piercing through like an echo of the perfectly caring creature he is under his horny craze.

They really need to work on Will’s vocabulary. And he also needs to get over himself, over his inhibitions that drag him down like a rock chained to his ankle.

“Yeah. I want to. Want you,” he stutters, and Will understands.

After those words it’s all sweat-slick hands and heavy breaths, grinding against each other, Will finding out how his temporarily altered biology works and discovering how good everything can feel.

Before long, Will pushes him down, makes Mike lie flat on the bed while he licks long stripes up his throat. Will is definitely into what they’re doing, into Mike when he presses his body against Mike’s bare thigh. It’s reassuring like nothing else, to be wanted and desired so much.

After a few miscalculated attempts at finding a steady rhythm, he starts grinding his hips against Mike – circular, frantic motions with a sharp snap at the end, and Mike briefly wonders how it would be to see Will coming like that, against his thigh, a cute frown of concentration on his pink and flustered face.

He puts his hands on Will’s hipbones and gives them a firm squeeze. And Will’s hands are everywhere again, touching every inch of his skin, holding Mike’s soul between a few of his fingers like it’s absolutely nothing.

With Mike rendered utterly defenceless, Will keeps littering his neck in hickeys that must bloom a vivid purple by the time they’re done. The world shrinks and becomes a tunnel with Will at the other end of it with his arms extended in invitation. They have sex like that, with

their limbs entangled and Will's heartbeat filling his ears in a musical *thump-thump-thump*.

Mike expected it to be awkward fumbling between two different species. A part of him expected it to fail somehow but it's glorious from the very beginning.

It's as if Will has peeled off every layer of him, delicate hands in direct contact with exposed nerve and bone marrow. That kind of sensation shouldn't be there, shouldn't be possible to manifest within the confines of the human body.

Will's movements turn sloppy after a while, the lack of experience peeking through. He pins Mike's hands down and growls like the sea creature he is, sweat dripping down his forehead in bright beads, and there's nothing Mike can do – he comes with a desperate shriek, Will following not long after.

They lie and bask together in the afterglow, and Mike's neck is so sore it hurts to place his head on the cotton of his pillow, but he still tilts his jaw up in surrender. His legs are two sticks of lead, limply dangling off the edge of the bed. Will is equally flustered, lips bitten raw. His hair is messy where Mike grabbed it and tugged in acute oversensitivity. His pupils are blown wide, swallowing the brown of his irises whole.

There's dried cum between their bodies, and they're slick with sweat, but Will seems to hardly care at all. He's content staring at Mike and studying his expressions.

"I made my mate feel good?" he asks, seemingly desperate for confirmation of some kind.

Mike closes their distance and pulls him into a crushing kiss that leaves Will gasping despite what they just did. Kissing the merman

it's always a novel experience – the other is enthusiastic and careless in his actions, grabbing Mike's jaw to keep him from pulling away, or digging his fingers into Mike's biceps for support. It's never just sweet or just dirty, it's both and neither.

Because he's not kissing a human.

And he's getting more and more okay with it.

"Fuck, you were perfect," Mike says with one last kiss on the corner of Will's mouth.

The merman smiles, proud. "That's good. I want to make you happy. I want us to live happily for as many moons as we're granted together."

Despite their enormous differences, in that moment Mike knows Will's mind with frightening clarity.

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### **A few months later**

Catastrophes tend to hit in the most surprising of ways.

Dustin is hosting a pool party, a party which involves drunk twenty-somethings, bathing suits and cheaply made cocktails, and the worst of all – copious amounts of water.

Mike tries to come up with every possible excuse to decline the invitation. He even goes so far as to consider pretending that some terrible sickness has befallen him. All that effort goes to waste though, because Will, who has his own phone bought in Mike's name, hears all about it from his cluelessly treacherous friends and demands

that they attend the gathering.

Will fusses over every single detail – about what he should wear (something green and pretty like his scales is the answer ninety percent of the time), what he should say and do, and if he should perhaps bring a gift of fresh fish with him (the answer is a firm no).

The merman has never been to a human party, and he finds the concept endlessly amusing. He drags Mike all around Socal, jumping up in fear and child-like wonder whenever a car or motorbike speeds past them. He wants to visit different shops and get sunglasses and flip flops and sunscreen, because he saw those things online and deemed them a necessity straight away.

Will is relentless in his efforts to convince Mike of his grand plan, and Mike is a weak son of a bitch, so he agrees reluctantly. Will can come to the party but he's not allowed outside into the backyard. He's to sit on the sofa and look pretty and never go even in a five metre radius of the pool and the people who spray water around like madmen.

Much to Mike's pleasant surprise, on the night of the party Will is blending in better than usual. He's getting slightly more used to impersonating a human thanks to no one other than Mike's mother, Karen.

He often discusses different topics with her, because the woman is absolutely bewitched by her son's new boyfriend and curiously forgiving of his constant oddities. One time she caught Will chomping down a raw salmon in the kitchen, but she just politely backed away and started whistling some old doowop song.

Luckily people at the party are generally nice as well, and also drunk enough not to give a second glance when Will starts to explain how his green bomber jacket goes perfectly with the rest of his body, or when he makes a hissing noise behind his teeth when some old acquaintance comes to give Mike a little *too* enthusiastic hug. Mike

sits beside Will like his shadow, sipping a low-alcohol drink and feeling a bit like a babysitter, but he likes that Will is having fun.

The seemingly water-tight plan crumbles to bits when the alcohol levels keep rising, and Will starts complaining that it's stuffy and too hot in the living room. In a bout of weakness Mike lets Will take a sip of Dustin's concoction, a sweet whiskey mix. Apparently mermaids are ultra-lightweight, so Will's entire face is flushed bright pink from just that, and the look in his eyes turns into the dim haze of a person half-way to drunkenness.

The second mistake comes not a minute later. No one is swimming anymore. The sun has set and the alcohol flows free, so Mike decides to take Will out for a bit of air, trying to get him to sober up.

As soon as they're out, Will beelines for the pool, crouching over the water and looking at the glowing pool lights below the surface.

"Get back from the edge," Mike snaps, and Will jolts at the harsh tone, and for an infinite second his limbs flail in the air, mouth open in surprise, glaring like he can't believe what he's just heard.

There's a big splash, water hitting Mike's ankles.

Fuck his life sideways, or whatever the saying is.

He drops his drink onto the tiles, but by some miracle the glass doesn't shatter. He stands in the puddle of gin and tonic, hands sweaty and numb.

Will isn't coming back up to the surface, hiding at the bottom of the pool. He must be embarrassed.

As he fucking should be.

*Or maybe he's too captured by the pool lights,* Mike thinks in a panic.

"Hey, Where did Will go? I made him a Jack and coke because he seemed to like it so much," Dustin calls out.

Mike freezes, tongue feeling like a brick in his mouth. He's standing between his friend and Will, just barely. Lucas, Max, and Jane are all coming through the door as well.

He's still frozen. Dustin is walking, a small smile on his face.

"Will felt sick. Go back to the party. I'll make sure he drinks some water and stuff."

Max raises an eyebrow. "Didn't he have like one sip? What are you talking about?"

"Did he run off into the bushes or something?" Lucas asks, equally unconvinced.

Jane takes a step closer, and there's no fucking way- "Umm, what's that floating in the water?"

Mike turns his head just enough to take a peek over her shoulder. It's Will's jeans, torn in half most likely.

The rest of his friends walk closer as well. It's dark but the pool is well illuminated. They just need to look down, take a fleeting glance at the bottom of the pool.

And that's exactly what they do next.

“What the fuck?” Lucas exclaims, clutching his chest with his free hand.

Dustin resorts to cursing like an old sailor, peering over the edge of the pool with a look that reminds Mike of a spooked house cat.

Will must hear the commotion, because he surfaces, tail flicking under him idly. He’s smacking his lips with a disgusted expression. “This water tastes weird.”

Still in his daze, Mike starts shaking his head. “Don’t swallow it.”

“It’s chlorine. You shouldn’t drink it.” Max adds on quietly.

Will grabs the edge of the pool and brings his fin to the surface. Mike’s friends let out another loud gasp as the light hits the translucent webbing between Will’s scales.

“Mike, he’s a—“ Jane starts, but the words get lost in the evening breeze.

“Yeah,” he sighs. “He sure is.” Mike confirms.

Crickets are singing like crazy in the night, highlighting the horrified silence. Mike knows he should be doing something, anything to get Will out of the water and someplace safe. But he does nothing but stare.

Max clears her throat, and Mike snaps his head in the direction of the sound. The patio door is closed, but anyone could come outside at any moment.

“That's not a costume, right?” Lucas confirms in an uncharacteristically squeaky voice.

“Nope.”

“Not a costume then... shit,” Dustin groans. “What do we do?” Mike doesn't bother to turn his head to look at his expression.

“We should get him out,” he says, defeated, deflated like a sad, sad birthday balloon.

Jane walks to the edge and kneels over the grates where the water falls after going over the edge.

“Will, are you alright?” she asks.

“I'm fine. This was an accident. Mike's gonna be mad at me,” Will says sighing and rests his chin on the edge next to Jane's leg.

“I'm not mad,” Mike says automatically. “This happened because of the water, so we'll need to dry him and—” he chokes on the rest of his



words, and both Max and Jane serve him one of their meaningful looks. “He’s heavier than he looks, so let’s hurry up.”

So they lift him up, and Will complains all the way through, saying that they’re pinching his scales and pulling his tail. Mike would really like to scream or drown himself in the pool, but neither of those is a real option right now.

They carry him around the corner and hide him behind a long patio table. Max says she has an idea, and that the others need to stand watch. Will pats his tail playfully against the wooden planks, producing a wet thud. He doesn’t seem overly concerned that Mike’s friends found out his secret. Will has taken a liking to them over the past months.

“Anything else we should know about your – boyfriend?” Max asks after another silence. She’s manifested a blow-dryer out of thin air, and it’s now plugged into a long extension cord. She’s directing the warm air onto Will’s scales, and the merman fidgets and complains that it tickles, so Max has to hold him down a little. Out of courtesy Will doesn’t bite her fingers off when she does that.

“Technically he’s not my boyfriend. We’re mated.”

Dustin interjects, confused. “What does that mean?”

“It means that this is *it* for me,” Mike says, pointing at Will who’s trying to wiggle away from the blow-dryer.

“Like – *forever* ?” Jane says with a raised brow. There’s a tinge of wonder in her voice.

Mike laughs in response, it sounds ridiculous and it’s even more odd that there isn’t crushing despair when he admits to it. “Yeah, I guess you could say forever. Mermaids don’t seem to understand the concept of divorcing.”

Lucas looks at him, expectantly. “Are you gonna get married, then?”

Mike’s smile won’t die down, it stretches the corners of his lips almost painfully. “Maybe at some point. I think Will would say yes if I asked.”

“How are you so cool about this?” Max demands. But he can’t take his eyes off Will, whose scales are glinting in the warm light spilling from the upstairs windows.

“I think I fell in love,” he answers with the appropriate gravity. He crosses his arms and tilts his jaw back, a tiny act of defiance.

Jane glances at him now. Her long wavy brown hair is behind one ear, neatly tucked away, so Mike can see her expression changing in excruciating detail. “Does he love you?”

He's quiet for a moment, but his heart remains light. “We’re still working on human concepts. But I think so. I can feel it in my bones when he looks at me. Even when he has to go back home and we’re

apart.”

“Jesus,” Lucas breathes out. “you’re crazy.”

“Batshit insane.” Dustin tacks on.

Mike’s smile only widens. “ *That I am .*”

Right at that moment Will’s human legs decide to make a sudden reappearance. Max jumps back with a shout stifled into the meat of one of her freckled arms. She throws the blow dryer onto the grass in horror, and the stream of hot air makes the blades of grass flutter. Lucas, Jane, and Dustin don’t react to the rapid transformation quite as strongly, but their eyes widen in a comical manner.

Mike laughs.

### **Author’s Note:**

If you made it this far, Thanks for reading this little slice of self indulgence - I’m a little anxious about this one but I hope you enjoyed reading as much as I enjoyed writing :)

I feel a bit like I’ve lost my grip on both of their characterisations lately but this is how it turned out. And I think I like it? So, I figured, just in case it’s the fic someone else needs, I’d share it!